

Kin From The Stars: Incursion

by Kinsmen From A Far Star

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Summary: Fifteen years after the Covenant War, ONI discovers the Systems Alliance; decimated by the Reapers six years ago. Faced with insurgency among the Colonies, ONI realizes it must make sure the truth never sees the light of day and begins a radical new plan, in a desperate attempt to buy the UNSC as much time as possible, and for that, it will need a new generation of Spartans...

## 1. Prologue I: Discovery

**Kin From The Stars: Incursion**

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**Prologue Part I: Discovery**

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**Semper Vigilans - Always Vigilant - ONI Motto**

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**5th August, 2568 (UNSC Standard Military Calender)**

What they were currently seeing redefined Human history as they knew it, more so than the Forerunner revelations. The sheer amount of new Intel pouring in from their Recon teams was enough to cut their AI's expected life span in half, their minds overwhelmed by just how much they learned in hours.

Now the Office of Naval Intelligence's top brass sat at a table inside a ship that didn't officially exist, to once again discuss information that would possibly never see the light of day.

"So just how many know?" was the first and obvious question.

"Beyond our Prowler crew? Only anyone who has access to this room," Rear Admiral Antony Curtyn; chief of the ONI Prowler Corps, responded.

"What about the original exploration vessel that uncovered the... anomaly?" A question came from Captain Gibson.

"They never actually saw the planet or the stellar object, they only detected its energy readings," Curtyn reassured them. "The Prowler that followed up the lead, suspecting an alien contact, were the only ones who witnessed the stellar object. I still have them on stand by in a nearby star system, waiting for further orders."

"The decision is, should we investigate this further?" one of the senior brass questioned. "and should this information be ever divulged? To the civilian government or even the populace as a whole?"

"Only as the last option," Admiral Margaret Parangosky quickly quashed any possibility of that. Indeed, the look on ONI's commander in chief's face was one of deep thought mixed with an unavoidable discomfort. Indeed, the one hundred and six year old head of ONI seemed more than uncomfortable with the situation "While the validity of the information currently being processed cannot be denied, for obvious reasons, this information will never be released unless contact becomes inevitable."

"Our obvious choice of route would to be initiate long-range, or even close range studies," Curtyn added his own advice. "It's likely we'll never see an opportunity to conduct such investigations like this again."

"They would have to be conducted carefully," the head of Section II; ONI's propaganda branch, Elisa Thompson argued. "We should not even estimate the back lash unleashed if this backfired and we were brought accountable for it."

"We won't," Parangosky agreed, "any recon or operations conducted from this point forward, would obviously through proxies."

That wasn't something they had to do for quite some time. For over a century now, they had grown accustomed to operating inside UNSC where they were above the law, and outside it, where they considered was no law. Since the end of the Covenant War however, ONI had begun to grow a new small batch of 'private organizations' which served as separate vessels for their operations in former Covenant space, to stay true to the Treaty that HIGHCOM had bound them under.

They even had a few Kig-Yar mercenaries who had been covertly recruited, to operate under the orders of their covert agents. They were paid well, and no one, not even the Kig-Yar themselves had any clue that who held their chain. It was a bit bothering when they were wiped out by their fellow clans, though over the years, they have grown more experienced in handling Xeno mercenary forces.

"I wouldn't go as far to start planning any field trips yet until we know exactly what we're dealing with," another Division Leader within Section III added. "I still don't believe that we could have found

another Humanity. Processing a revelation like this, is beyond the entirety of the scientific branch."

Another Humanity indeed. Aligned with alien races. It was hard to swallow, almost beyond imaginable.

"On the other Humanity branch of the argument, have you come up with any possible theories to explain this yet, Doctor Lendin?" Elisa Thompson raised the question.

"Our AI's are doing their best to compare the information our Prowler extracted from their equivalent of a planetary network, their home world, timeline and ours," the head of their Scientific Branch; and ONI's chief scientist ever since Doctor Halsey had 'died' so to speak, Doctor Lendin answered. "However, we put the time which either of our populations were separated at more than fifty thousand years, which is far too little time for this to be the work of the Forerunners, who were already terminated by the Halo Array at that time. It's still tens of thousands of years prior to even the first events of recorded history among the Covenant species."

"Another alien presence then?"

"Exactly my thought," Lendin agreed. "While from the uncovered artifacts show in Covenant civilization that they had the... gifts of the Forerunner, they were certainly not the first group of space fairing species to return to space after the Halos activation. If an alien race visited the Earth about fifty thousand years ago, took a number of subjects to another world... we could have kin among the stars."

"A very interesting subject," Parangosky nodded, "but we must all understand that this discovery poses a greater threat to our own civilization than the Covenant War."

Everyone assembled in the room past gazes between each other, wondering if the person sitting next to them knew more than they did, and perhaps this new branch of Humanity were insane cannibals that could send the Covenant running for their mothers. However, this threat wasn't in a conventional sense, but a cultural threat.

"I'm bloody well sure, that nobody in this room would even think they could imagine a time when there was no more than one government that represented the entirety of Humanity," Parangosky explained, standing up. "When the UEG was founded, and the UNSC beyond that, the first President made a speech that defined us.  
>Never again, shall Humanity stand divided. Never again, will any of Humanity live under another code of law that is not the accepted law of the many."<p>

"I am quite familiar," Doctor Lendin nodded, "the exact philosophical reasoning for combating the insurrection."

"And the exact reasoning that I'm saying now," Parangosky agreed. "If the masses ever became aware of a Human government that is not the United Earth Government, then I must confess that we would not stand any test of time. I think we all must agree, that the UNSC saved Humanity. If we had appeased the Insurrection Movement, let our colonies separate themselves from Earth, then we would have never stood one chance at surviving the Covenant."

That itself, was undeniable true fact. Assuming that every UNSC world had been self-governed at the time of the Covenant War, then each world would have obviously taken to its own best interests, and the Covenant would have defeated each planetary military world by world instead of facing the united UNSC fleets that had bulked together, fortified and coordinated a joint response from across the entirety of Human space.

Any many among those present now, that Humanity wasn't just saved by the UNSC's military strategy, but by their own less ethical and... Utilitarianism means. Without the UNSC, there would have been no Office of Naval Intelligence, and thus forth there would have never been any Spartan Program, a key factor in their survival.

It had been the UNSC that protected Humanity, guided it, acted in the overall interests of it, and had grown Humanity to where it was now.

"What we know of this 'Systems Alliance', is the fact that they have allowed Humanity to leave their jurisdiction and space, and have allowed their independence to be corroded by alien powers which constrain technological advances such as AI technology. The fact is, they are weaker for it. If we informed the UEG Senate, they would obviously be naive enough to step forward and make contact with them. Two results from this. Either this Citadel Council would attempt to force us together with our lost brethren and we lose everything, or the Insurrection would collapse the UNSC under a surge of protesters demanding the same rights of this other Humanity."

There was a collaborative nod from every Section and Division Head of ONI. The two obvious outcomes presented were possibly the only results that could out of contact, maybe asides from a small hope that the UNSC could starve off another even greater civil war against the rebellion possibly backed by interlopers from this other Humanity.

"It is our duty to protect Humanity and the UNSC, and we shall do so," Parangosky concluded. "From what our AI's conclude, they and their alien civilization counterparts have built themselves upon a network of jump gates they term Mass Relays. This means, by our own standard, they are randomly scattered across the entirety of our galaxy. Once again, relying on this Mass Relay technology, they have weakened themselves since they have not uncovered any means to go beyond a star cluster on their primitive FTL tech. It is fact that our reversed engineered Covenant Drives can reach speeds a hundred times that of their own FTL, and that's not even considering how tiny that is compared to the Forerunner Slip Space Drives. >This means, that as long as they keep to their Relays, they will never uncover the UNSC which sits beyond the boundaries which they can travel. Meanwhile, we have the opportunity to gaze in on them. As the Rear Admiral here, suggests," she nodded to Curtyn, "we can study them without even a chance that they will know of our existence. Thankfully enough, we still look exactly the same as our kin, and this opens up possibilities for infiltration and recon."<p>

"I'll see to it, that the UEG Department of Navigation marks all these star clusters within these Mass Relays exists as hazard sectors," Curtyn agreed. Even Rebels and Pirates steered clear of areas of space that had been marked as dangers, not willing to chance

it that the government was hiding something or they really were about to jump into a Slip Space anomaly that saw them transit into a wormhole.

>Also, by the coordinates of the cluster we found, I place it too far away for the old covies to uncover anytime soon."<p>

"From this point forward, this discovery and information relevant are classified and shall only be discussed within Section III, Beta Five. Rear Admiral Curtyn will coordinate the further reconnaissance of the Systems Alliance coordinating with the Asymmetrical Actions Group." Parangosky declared, sealing the fate of all that was revealed to ONI's top brass. "Section I, is furthermore responsible for silencing any leaks of the existence of this information and I want Section II to prepare a contingency package in case that contact is initiated."

Indeed, this was big enough to coordinate all Sections of ONI; save for Section Zero that handled internal investigations. For everyone inside Odin's Eye, on the ship that didn't exist known as the Point of No Return, their prospective on the universe had changed forever.

Humanity hadn't just found aliens amongst the stars.

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><p><strong>Several Months Later...<strong>

\*\*21st November, 2192 (Systems Alliance Earth Standard)

><strong>

Across the expanse of the galaxy, far from even the Orion Arm, stood one who was a legend to the many.

Commander Mathew Shepard knew the dangers of becoming the reclusive hero. Following the Reaper Wars, in the many conversations he had with people he'd met along the way, Kahlee Sanders; a friend of the late Admiral Anderson, had told him about her farther, the legendary John Grissom who had at his time been a mythical hero amongst Human history as Shepard was today, though Grissom never wanted the spotlight, and became a reclusive old man who just wanted to escape his own identity.

It wasn't a path he wanted to go down, and Shepard at least knew he couldn't disappear forever. He had kept up the fight. Against the remnants of Cerberus, and later against the resurgent threat from the Terminus outlaws.

That was why he was currently once again standing on the bridge of the Normandy as it initiated yet another jump through the Relays.

"Hitting the relay in 5..."

"A countdown is pointless, Jeff. I am perfectly capable of monitoring our progression to the Relay."

"Way to kill the nostalgia, EDI," the pilot Jeff Monrou, otherwise known as Joker, chuckled. "There are only two people on this ship

that remember the initial Utopia shakedown run."

"The way Eden Prime kept going down, I think the star system is in need of a rename," Shepard nodded in agreement. "Less Utopia, more the Bad Luck System."

"Oh, I'm sure they're not getting invaded this week again..." Joker rolled his eyes playfully. "We go through the next Relay to Hades Gamma, then were only six more Relay jumps till the Perseus Veil."

"Makes me wonder how Sovereign initially got this far from Geth space without somebody noticing," Shepard commented, gazing out at massive colossal structure known to the galaxy as the Mass Relays grew ever larger as they approached. "Though, I guess have your own personal Relay network helps, doesn't it?"

The Mass Relays generated a mix of emotions amongst them. While having the Relay system back again and intact about a few years after the war, they still didn't know everything about them as the Reapers did. The Reapers could adjust Primary Relays to jump to any other Relay nearby, and they could adjust secondary Relays to send them pretty much anywhere in the galaxy. Despite having overthrown the galaxy's Reaper masters, they were still like kids playing with advanced technology. They could use it, but they didn't particularly understand how it worked yet, either.

Hopefully, however, they would be one step closer to finding out the Relay's inner workings soon, as well as working out how the Reapers also had so much more efficient jump drives.

"I could imagine it," Joker nodded in agreement. "No more traffic congestion for me. Seriously, the Relays into the Serpent Nebula are more congested these days than if you tried flying the entire old Migrant Fleet through the Presidium ring."

"Speaking of the Migrant Fleet, and thus speaking of--"

"Yea, yea, I get the picture, Shepard," Joker told him. "Tali still down in engineering?"

"Running the entire engineering component of the ship, yes," Shepard answered.

"The Normandy's necessary crew is actually significantly low, as long as I am present and we acquire regular maintenance between trips," EDI replied. "though Miss Zorah's continued operation of engineering without the assistance of Chief Adams, or Engineers Kenneth or Gabriel is remarkably efficient, all things considered."

"And I can fly this thing pretty well much on my own, so I guess all the rest of the crew have always been performance boosters rather than necessities, right?" Joker commented. "Or should I pick up the additional role of reminding you about your unread messages?"

"Well, after you taste anything I put together, you're going to have to add a cook to your list, Joker," Shepard added jokingly, nudging the pilot's seat.

"Gah..."

They hit the Mass Relay, and the Normandy was shot through faster than light speeds and ended up in another star cluster in the matter of seconds. Joker didn't drop them directly out at the Relay, but continued to drift, using only the minimum amount of fuel to move them just a bit closer to their destination at the next Relay.

"What you know? Drift in under fifth-teen hundred K."

"What am I supposed to say? Fifth-teen hundred K is good? Your captain will be pleased?"

"Something like that. We should have brought Kaiden along for this trip, and this whole nostalgic rerun could have gone a whole lot further," Joker answered.

"I don't recall anything about short conversation to make it nostalgic, really," Shepard commented.

"Yea, well, you just don't remember the hailstorm of rainbows and bunnies we encountered on Eden Prime," Joker muttered sarcastically, as they heard the door open behind them.

"What's this? You're remembering old times without me?" Tali jokingly told them, nudging Shepard's shoulder as she passed him.

"Be thankful," EDI answered, swiveling around in her chair, "I find sarcasm a rather unpleasant way of communicating."

"Better than saying 'death bots and their sentient dreadnought god', EDI." Joker responded, tapping away on the controls as he spoke. They dropped out of Faster Than Light in preparation for another Relay jump to the next Star Cluster. "A few more Relays to Rannoch."

"It'll be good to be back again..." Tali muttered.

"This time for a little longer stay?" Shepard smiled.

"Hopefully, yes." Tali nodded in agreement. It had been six years since the Reaper Wars, longer now than their entire journey (including the time he had technically spent dead), of three years by double. He hadn't exactly been able to retire, and months spent scouting for Cerberus Remnants became a year, then another... it was fine, as Normandy was as home to them as anywhere could be. While the remaining indoctrinated Cerberus forces were willing to surrender at the sight of an Alliance patrol, demoralized beyond restoration, the time it had taken for them to bust down every last remnant had taken a year, which then became another...  
>By time they finished dealing with Cerberus, the piracy and slaving business in the Terminus Systems had already recovered and was operating once again. Thus, they were thrust into another conflict.<p>

"So once I drop you on Rannoch, I'm sure I'm able to take the Normandy for a little joyride around the galaxy, right?" Joker asked. "I'll have it back in one piece, I promise..."

"You know that the Normandy is to be returned to dry dock, Joker. Can hardly have you lose another Normandy," Shepard told him.

"Damn, I was totally hoping to scare some-" Joker stopped mid sentence, glancing down at the controls. "Hold on a sec. There appears to be a communication coming in; on the Quantum communicator."

"Just who from?" Shepard asked. Joker rolled his eyes again and began speaking mockingly:

"Why, it's just the Council calling on their new direct line, to boss us around some more. No. It's our old friend the Shadow Broker, of course."

"Liara?" Tali questioned, knowing that this might just be an interruption. A friendly social call would have come through the old relay COM buoys, not the Quantum Entanglement Communicators.

"Must be something important," Shepard concluded what they all knew. "I'll head back, and check it out." He turned around and headed back through the bridge door and Tali followed.

"Yea... well, just call ahead if we were being diverted to another endless desert in the search of lost relics!" Joker called to them as they left. As the bridge door slid shut behind them, Tali rested her head against his shoulder as they walked.

"It'll be nice to get back to Rannoch again... a nice holiday for a while."

"It's good to get out of the Normandy for a while, right?"

"If it wasn't for EDI, I would have gone insane recalibrating the ship's equipment by now..." They passed through the old checkpoint, the scanner long since deactivated and left that way.

"Tell me, are the main guns calibrated?..."

"One more joke from Garrus and the next thing that Thannix Cannon will be firing is at you, bos'tet..."

They both stepped through the door into what had been the War Room during the Reaper War. Afterwards, a majority of the technology in the room save the table in the center had been removed by the Alliance, honestly no longer needed here. The entire room was empty save for the railings. Beyond however, was the Normandy's still intact Quantum Entanglement Communicators.

They eventually stood before the Communicator, and Shepard hit the bleeping panel for the incoming call to be brought up. Before them, a hologram of Liara T'Soni appeared, the Shadow Broker sitting and not standing.

"Ah, Shepard. Tali." The Asari nodded in greeting to the both of them. Shepard returned the nod.

"Liara. Going well?"

"I'm fine, thanks for asking, but I had to call you on something I found."



"It's rather an inconvenient time for this now, don't you think?" Tali questioned.

"I don't mean to drag you off course, but this information is rather concerning." Liara told them. "While you've been busy, in the Arcturus Cluster, at Benning, a sensor array belonging to the local universities set up to monitor nearby stellar anomalies detected strange readings not too far from the planet. It's not the output of Ezeo or anything we've encountered."

"You called on the Quantum Communicators to talk about an anomaly?" Shepard asked.

"If you'd let me explain, further, I'll explain that what many think is an anomaly, is something else entirely. It's very important."

"What's so special about this anomaly?" Tali questioned.

"Rips, and tearing in space itself. A hole, large enough to consume a ship, appears, but only for an instant before closing again. It appeared once, and then again nine hours later. The anomaly was noted, even reported, but then it happened again in larger numbers a week later. A ship was actually sent out to try to predict where the next tear would happen so it could be studied, but it could never get close enough. Until it was realized that a heat signature appeared each time this rip happened."

"So, holes in space let out hot air?" Shepard assumed, not exactly being a scientist in wormholes.

"No, nothing like that, even if it was possible to begin with. It's a heat signature of a ship, much like the Normandy's own stealth system. When emerging from FTL, the stealth system is unable to hide the amount of the ship's heat. Having worked on the Normandy myself, I was quick to recognize the signs of a stealth ship."

"The Alliance has many new Normandy Class Frigates itself, as well as the Hierarchy now," Shepard reasoned. "Sure this isn't just the Alliance testing new jump drive technology or their stealth systems?"

"With the Network functioning at full capacity again, as the Shadow Broker, I'd know about pretty much anything taking place anywhere civilized space. I doubt that anything we know of could have caused these worm holes. I honestly think it's a ship, though my theory however, has supposedly been debunked by this..."

Liara reached down and tapped a few buttons on her desk, transmitting two video streams, one an unedited version and another in Infrared vision. Shepard and Tali watched as the wormhole appeared, a blue gap torn in space. On the infrared, Shepard saw a mass of heat move out of this tear in space, though he saw totally nothing on the unedited video.

"Nothing we can see, comes out," Liara summarized, "this eventually led most back to what I consider ridiculous: some kind of anomaly caused by solar wind. I however, studied it closer and found this."

The footage played again, but the video was zoomed in and slowed down. They watched again as the infrared signature passed through the circular gap, but this time, the other video stream showed a shimmer pass through, this shimmer also passing through the infrared mass.

"What is that?" Shepard questioned.

"It's not like solar wind. The shimmer fluctuates in and out." Tali asked.

"The shimmer is far too irregular to be solar wind," Liara agreed. "I've constructed a profile from this, and I believe it does indeed fit something the size of a large Frigate. I even compared it with another set of appearances of the anomaly, and I've discovered that they're highly alike. It seems, it even happens in reverse, which I assume is the ship leaving the system."

"So your theory is that it's a ship creating these wormholes? Coming and going?" Shepard asked.

"More importantly, an invisible ship," Liara nodded.

"That's... impossible," Tali shook her head. "I mean, we've seen a few working portable stealth field generators around the place, and the Geth have them, but they just take up too much energy to ever even think of deploying on a ship. They're useless anyhow, seeing that most of the time, you can't see a tiny ship in space anyway."

"They'd be highly useful however. Combine invisibility with our current stealth systems, and we wouldn't have anyway to detect such vessels," Shepard noted. "They could decimate every ship we have, and we'd be defenseless."

"A very chilling line of thought, I agree," Liara nodded. "What's more important, is the fact that these invisible ships can spy on us, and we have no idea who they are or what they're doing. After coming out of their wormholes, we'd have no idea where they went after that."

"What I find more interesting is that Reapers never used technology like this," Shepard added.

"It could be like Legion said," Tali commented, "maybe this technology just wasn't on their technological path... and neither is it on ours."

Possibly indeed. Shepard knew the Reaper's technology was inherited from their almost vanquished creators: the Leviathans, and from what he knew of them, he doubted the Leviathans ever required the essence of stealth to conquer the galaxy. The Reapers obviously didn't ever need stealth either, with brute force a far easier option to them.

"I'm all but certain that these ships are coming in and out of the Euler System, and ever since we've started studying them, they just disappeared and began appearing somewhere else, on the dark side of the gas giant Silva, like they don't want to be found. When we tracked them there, they disappeared again. Perhaps they thought

infiltration now was too risky, or perhaps they're now entering the system through an even more covert entry location."

"To you think you have enough evidence to put this forward to the Citadel Council, yet?" Shepard asked. "If these really are incursions, then they should know."

"Currently, every astrologist in the Arcturus Stream is debating over this," Liara told them. "While my opinion would be highly credible to any theory, I don't think the Alliance personally wants to even hear anything that could be trouble after the Reapers."

While Shepard personally despised those who dug their heads in the sand when trouble brewed, those same who caused so many damn casualties to the Reapers, he could understand the Alliance; still crippled by the war, not in any sort of mood for finding any trouble or causing unrest. It was better to blame this wormholes on a series of anomalies rather than dig into the alien incursion theory that would put everyone back on edge. Still, there was a price of ignorance.

"So do you have any further plans to look into this?" Shepard then questioned.

"Well, the exact reason I called you, was to see if while you were taking a break, Jeff could bring the Normandy to the Euler system and use your scanning system to see if we can track them. If we could get some real concrete evidence, it would move things along greatly and maybe even bring our possible visitors out of the shadows."

"That could be done," Shepard agreed.

"Thanks, Shepard," Liara nodded. "I'll send through the exact coordinates to Joker. Be safe, and may the goddess go with you."

The communication terminated and the Asari disappeared. Shepard didn't know what to think of this, but he trusted Liara's own thoughts. He turned, seeing Tali slouched against the wall slightly.

"What do you think of it?" He questioned.

"What do I think? That somewhere, somebody takes joy out of ruining every chance we get to spend some time together. We had to cut our last break short so you could resolve one incident, now it looks like our latest time away is going to get cut short if Joker pulls some alien spies out of the shadows kicking and screaming."

"Well..." Shepard shrugged. "then I'm sure hope they have the sense to run away when they see him coming. I promise this time, nothing-"

"Don't lie," Tali shook her head. "We both know when something comes up as it always does, we have to drop what we're doing and run off again to resolve it. Don't tell me that if we suddenly got invaded by some invisible aliens tomorrow, you'd shrug it off and tell the Council you'd leave it for next week because it's been more than a year now since we've gotten to spend some decent time by ourselves. You'd have to get back on the Normandy, and do something. It's what I expect."

"You know I hate how it has to be that way," Shepard answered, taking her hand. "You know I've planned for us to leave the Normandy. Permanently. It's just..."

"You've figured out, that we never truly have stopped having problems. It's fact. After we finished with Cerberus, it had given enough time for all the Pirates that the Reapers had trimmed to come back in full force. After we dealt with that? There's simply just more somewhere else. It will never end, Shepard, we just need to..."

"give up and live the rest of our lives in peace?"

"Yes!... well... maybe. You've done so much, sacrificed so much, and of all people, you just deserve to just leave this behind. Really."

"Sometimes I want too, I really do, but... I'm worried that every time I turn my back, it'll all just fall apart. It's never been about the Geth, Cerberus or even the Reapers. It's been about... for the last few years, the Normandy's presence has broken the backs of any pirate or slaver incursion any cluster we've visited. I'd never forgive myself if I turned my back for a second, and another Mindoir happened..."

"That wouldn't be your fault and you should never think otherwise. Shepard... you won't be able to do this forever. One day, you'll have to accept that it's time to... let the galaxy run its course without you."

"Then what would you say then, if we just didn't come back from this break? If we left here, and never returned from the Normandy?" Shepard asked. "I've still got that promise to keep."

"Trust me, we've always got time for that as long as we live..." Tali told him, "just... I have to admit, the reason I've stayed all this time that the Normandy has been more a home to me than any house could be. If we come back to this after the month we spend on Rannoch, I don't mind. All I care about, is that if the time came, you'd be happy walking away from this."

"I'll always be happy as long as we're together..." they embraced in a hug.

"Thanks, Shepard... it really matters to me."

"I survived the Reapers, Tali. I don't think there's any stronger force in the universe that could keep us apart."

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><p>"Tell me, Doctor, what are the differences between... us and them." Vice Admiral Ned Rich questioned, looking quite intrigued at the work before him.<p>

"There are actually very few differences, actually. There was once a theory that time was cynical. If one was placed under the same conditions, with no differences what so ever, would events occur the same? It is questionable," Doctor Lendin explained. "assume you Terra

formed an entire star system, adjusted it with the great technological expertise that the Tier 0 species had, and placed an amount of Humans all across the planet... assume we had two Earths? Would they progress the same?"

"But aren't obviously the same," Rich questioned.

"Indeed not. While we see that they have a Terra formed Earth... or maybe we have a Terra formed Earth, that seismic events, cataclysms and other sorts happens in different time periods, as well as a completely different history. While it is geography itself that forms national borders, and they indeed did also go through similar time periods to our own. Since the gap is only about fifty thousand years, they haven't developed any significantly different language patterns, though they live in a translator based society where two individuals could speak a different language and never know the difference their entire lives."

"I expect history and geography to be difference, but what about aesthetics? If we dropped a man down onto one of their colonies right now, could he be picked out of the crowd?" Rich asked.

"Not really. As many know, our civilization has allowed us to grow rather rapidly in size that dwarf our ancestors, a bit of evolution to overabundance. Since our Earth has prospered far longer and more widely under civilization than our Systems Alliance counterpart, we may averagely have more superior Human beings, not counting our upgrades genetically and cybernetically; we are even far more superior in that field."

"So not only did they have to be lifted to the stars by aliens, they are also physically and evolutionarily weaker..." The Vice Admiral nodded. "I find that quite concerning."

"As much as I'd like to refute that, scientifically, you may just be correct..." Lendin nodded. "Though we just have so many similarities, we are technically still all Human. The differences aren't that much, and as I say: I'm speaking in averages gathered from UNSC Censuses and these ones we've taken from the System Alliance networks."

"Everything can't happen the same," The Vice Admiral was skeptical of that, sitting slouched forward on the bench from the stool he was sitting on amidst Lendin's laboratory. "So where exactly is the Prowler Corps extracting all this information, anyway?"

"The Systems Alliance, and all Citadel Space we believe, has an open interplanetary network that spans between all their worlds, a lot like our twentieth first century Internet I believe. Com Buoys constantly exchange probes through Mass Relays, so most of the time, they're so called 'extranet', is updated every so and so with new information from other star systems, sometimes almost instantaneously. A Prowler easily intercepted this, and its shipboard AI has used it to extract information useful to us, ever since."

"Ha, so not only are they naive enough to put all their information in the air for anyone to grab, but they also allow their worlds to share data?" He questioned. Of course, the United Nations Space Command had stopped any technological endeavor to create some way of

expanding their networks beyond system wide in the twenty second century. Through Slip Space, with colonies separated by weeks of travel, by time anyone got any data, it would be totally out of date. A majority of the colonies didn't even have an equivalent to the Earth's internet before the Covenant War.

"Indeed so. I don't think they are that concerned for the security of data that is shared across their empire. In fact, they find it hard to believe than any space fairing species can prosper away from their Mass Relay network," Lendin explained.

"They might just be in for a rude awakening..." Rich suggested, "as far as Intel is concerned, they've got under even fifty real solid colonies, correct?"

"Well..." Lendin frowned, placing the tablet he was holding on the desk. "What our AI's have gathered, is that only six years ago, the Citadel Empire went to war with a Tier 1 civilization known as the Reapers, who supposedly were actually responsible for the construction of the Mass Relays and the colossal space station that serves as their capital. They won it, and eradicated the Reapers. Such scale of a conflict proves they may indeed have their own very powerful military powers."

"That 'Tiers' thing is something the eggheads down in archeology dug up from the Forerunners, Doc. As the newly uncovered evidence suggests, the Proclusors were Tier 0 and that never saved them," Vice Admiral Rich dismissed it. "These 'Reapers', don't really compare up that well against our fleet, all the battle data the AI's have compared being considered. Their so-called 'Dreadnought' was two kilometers. Our old Halcyon Cruisers are one point two and the Infinity is five and a half. If the Systems Alliance beat them off with insuperior MAC Canons and the fact they never learned how to successfully deploy nuclear weaponry in vacuum, really downplays this now disposed of Reaper threat."

"I suppose you're right, sir," Doctor Lendin nodded, his morale perhaps spurred by Rich's point of view. If the Reapers ever actually came to the UNSC... they would have been dealt with. "They're dead now anyway, so I guess they don't matter. The fact is, the Systems Alliance at the moment may be well experienced in the arts of war, but their as war-weary as we are from our war with the Covenant about ten years ago.

"Yes, but we were bigger to begin with," Vice Admiral Rich confidently responded. "We built our technology, our empire, while they leached it off aliens. We fought our own war for survival, and we won it alone. It's obvious were the stronger branch."

"But maybe the more vulnerable branch, sir," Lendin added. "while the amount of freedom they grant citizens has significantly crippled their ability to control their security, the cultural impact they could have on us just through contact could break us."

"I've looked at a rundown of their capabilities, Doctor," Rich told him, "they allow terrorists to flourish, undermine government control and allow alien slavers to carry off their people. I don't know about you, but I think it's the other way around. I think, any other Human out there, those independent Terminus colonies not under Systems Alliance control, would see the logic and reasoning in the UNSC, as

well as the security it provides."

"The problem would be if they don't, Vice Admiral." Doctor Lendin told him.

"It doesn't matter really," Rich simply added. "I trust in Rear Admiral Curtyn to keep his ships far from any peeking eyes. Besides, their technology shall prove useful, especially if we can replicate these 'Mass Relays'."

"They've tried, sir, but the Relays appear to be extremely advanced pieces of technology. Rear Admiral Curtyn is still working on a plan to capture us a Mass Effect Drive for study."

"Oh, it's just not the technology that's important, Doctor... in fact, their 'Biotics' could be of benefit too."

"How so? That we could replicate their abilities to our soldiers? It would be a massive advantage against the Covenant remnants."

"Well, yes. It's just what I had in mind for an upcoming project I've been placed in charge of," the Vice Admiral nodded. "So I'm ordering you to keep informed on any further updates on your efforts into uncovering more of these Citadel worlds, Doctor."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Two Months Later<strong>\*\*  
><strong>

Doctor Catherine Halsey was hardly even in the general emotional state to even want to see any faces of the ONI bureaucracy that damned her to her fate, but it wasn't like she had a choice.

Led by two armed guards through the corridors of Station Ivanoff, she was seated at a meeting table, the same meeting table in which Admiral Parangosky had condemned her to be kept here on this research station orbiting Installation 03.

>A part of her mind wondered if she was about to meet the Admiral yet again. In the last few weeks, her current work had dried up as less and less Forerunner technology was passed onto her to study. Maybe she had finally outlived her usefulness and was about to get a merciful execution. Or perhaps the elderly head of ONI had died, and her successor had come personally here to make the fact known to her and that things weren't going to change one tiny bit.<p>

Whatever scenario she theorized, she dreaded it.

It was actually surprising when it was Beta Five Division Member, Rear Admiral Ned Rich, now Vice Admiral Ned Rich, who was there. Apparently, the man had significantly cleaned himself up over the last few decades, maybe after growing some sense and wanting to get his career back on track. Regardless of any of that, he was here.

"Ah, Doctor Halsey. They're quite not as dead as they say you are," Ned Rich smiled. Halsey didn't bother to return it.

"I've spent over a decade now without any decent social contact with another Human being, Vice Admiral, but that doesn't mean I've lowered

my standards when it comes to humor."

"Hm. Of course," Rich simply nodded, looking down at the folder in front of him. "Believe it or not, Doctor, despite your fallout from favor, you still are quite a valuable asset to ONI. I personally just wish that you could be applied to a place where you could be of more use to us."

"On a Research Station orbiting an artificial ring world isn't applied enough?" Halsey questioned, wondering what great event had arisen to take ONI's eyes off looting every last bit of Forerunner technology they found.

"Depends on what were studying. Old relics of a dead race. Or Humanity itself." Rich told her. "Tell me, are you familiar with the code Snake Eyes?"

"I still remember every ONI Code from when I was actually informed of anything, and that's not one of them. It must have come into use in the decades I spent rotting away here," Halsey commented. "Whatever it is, just how would it be relevant, Vice Admiral?"

"The codeword Snake Eyes, deals with defection, but not the defection of any regular UNSC personnel. The code Snake Eyes was created with the Spartan IV Program, to deal with the obvious risk of Insurrectionist infiltrators or defectors. The risk of creating an Insurrectionist Super Soldier is well guarded against."

"That's what happens when you drop the ethical code, isn't it, Rich?" Halsey questioned, knowing obviously how this result. There were always traitors in every conflict.

"Indeed. Code Snake Eyes was first declared nine years ago, on a single rogue soldier. Currently now, we have nineteen declarations of Snake Eyes. Five years ago, Admiral Parangosky placed me in charge of a new Program to correct any errors we made."

"Surprising, or maybe not," Halsey commented again, "at this rate, I estimate by the next century, we may already have Spartan X's, right?"

"It's far from humorous, Doctor." Rich told her. "The Spartan V Project shall avoid any previous ethical and moral issues, while also avoiding recruiting those who may betray us later on."

"Hm," that was probably the only thing in the conversation that slightly intrigued her. Not recruiting adults, but not recruiting younger either.

>"So how will you do that, Vice Admiral?"<p>

"Flash Cloning is still practically useless on a large term scales, but practical cloning isn't. With the right systems, we've avoided any significant financial cost, and created a new wave of subjects for our program," Rich explained.

"Interesting... full-grown clones," Doctor Halsey acknowledged, "though I see we still don't abide by UNSC Medical Law, do we?"

"Petty comments aside, Doctor, this is an obvious true step towards



creating a worthy successor to the earlier program," the Vice Admiral stated. "though, clones aren't all I wanted for the program. I suggested to Admiral Parangosky, that we attempt something new. Something that will make this program landmark, just as your II Program did so long ago now."

That may of slightly been interesting, though Halsey was sure it was Rich's ego speaking. Unless they could their soldiers neigh invincible, she doubted they could come anywhere close to even matching her Spartan II Program.

"A shift from focus on direct combat," Rich surprisingly announced, "to infiltration. The Spartan IV Program is still in operation and handles putting Spartans in combat zones, but what I wanted is a new type of Spartan. One with the unique capability of handling any threat, anywhere in the galaxy. One with the unique capability of addressing the unique new crisis ONI had found us in."

"Interesting... and just how would these changes be?" Halsey questioned.

"Well first, not all subjects would be Human." Rich announced, and that sentence was the first thing in years, no, decades, that generally had generated a real response from her. It was intriguing, yet... highly impractical.

"All you need to do is talk to any xenologist, who could tell you that such an insane effort is doomed to failure," Halsey told him. "I don't see how it could work."

"That's why I have recruited nearly every remaining top Sentient Xeno Specialist I could find," Rich told her. "It's been quite some time since we met other sentient amongst the stars. We know them now, Doctor. After intense study and theories undertaken on test subjects, I have been told that Sangheili are highly compatible for the program when recruited at the correct age. They can even be upgraded, just like your Spartans to be better than their own rabble. Imagine, Doctor, split lips fighting for us, instead of against us."

"Do you know why I never lied to the candidates, Rich?" Halsey questioned. "I could have spun any number of lies to motivate them, to make them thankful of their place, but I didn't. I told them the truth, because in order to ensure their complete loyalty, I knew I couldn't lie to them. Honestly, I have no idea how you plan on putting a creature into battle against its own kind and not thinking one moment that it would ever have second thoughts about its allegiance?"

"And how do your Spartans shoot their fellow beings? It's because their loyal and they know what their fighting for." Rich answered. "They won't be the only ones either."

"Oh?" Halsey added. "Has the UNSC boomed into a wide galactic community while I was locked up? There are many sentient beings out there, ripe for ONI's picking? Because I certainly don't remember ONI having that ability."

The Vice Admiral showed a genuine sign of amusement. Rich glanced down at his folder.

"Indeed, a new situation has arisen in which the UNSC requires sight into foreign territory a Human just can't get to. This new contact incident and the need for these infiltrators, was what spurred this radical change of concept to begin with. We could operate anywhere."

"Your program sounds quite ambitious, Vice Admiral," Halsey told him, "though it's another thing entirely in pulling this thing off."

"That's why, I want the best, no matter what. I consider you, Doctor, to be that best." Rich finally got the point of the entire trip. "We're still a year out from even starting the program, and your expertise and experience would be invaluable to us. I was willing to bargain with Margaret to even get you to chance to change from this dead-end research station back to a real innovative project were someone of your intelligence is needed. Would you be willing to consider, accepting my offer, and join my new Program as Head Supervisor?"

Halsey was silent for the moment. She mused what an offer she was facing. She had spent the last two decades struggling with her own conscience to try and redeem some of the guilt that warped her mind after the Spartan II Project, which she never successfully had thanks to ONI. Now, she was being offered to do the same thing again, but since it was to non-Humans (and some clones), it was now slightly more morally acceptable?

>The Program would go ahead regardless if she joined with the Vice Admiral's highly unprovable program, but if he had somehow convinced Beta Five to allow the changes he proposed, then maybe it was more likely in succeeding than her bitter mind thought... and maybe it was her one chance to escape her own personal hell.<p>

"The offer still stands, Doctor." Rich decided she spent far too much time musing about it. "My ship departs in six hours. If you do wish to join me, all you have to do is say the word."

"What I don't understand is why you couldn't just ask Parangosky to transfer me to your program," Halsey told him. "It's not like I would have a choice."

"Like you said earlier, the truth must be told in order to earn loyalty. You'd be useless unmotivated." Rich nodded.

"Then... I accept your offer." Halsey finally agreed.

"That's good, Doctor." The Vice Admiral smiled as he rose to his feet. "I knew you'd understand. Return to your quarters, and prepare for your transfer. Oh, and I may just recommend to clean up your act. I do understand you've been locked away on this hunk of metal for a decade, but I won't excuse any further insubordination under my command. I'll enjoy working together with you in the future, Doctor Halsey..."

The Vice Admiral turned and left the room at a brisk pace. Halsey still sat.

\_I've been told to clean up my act by Ned Rich. How times have changed indeed...\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em>Author's Afterward:<br>\_\*\*

\*\*This was practically an idea of mine that popped into my head, and I honestly didn't think I could make it into a Fan Fiction, but after a day of sitting down and writing, I figured I could make something of this.

>Both Earth's aren't exactly the same. Which has the altered timeline, I'd say the UNSC.<br>\*\*

\*\*While I enjoy looking through the Crossover sections from time to time, my personal favorite choice is in which an AU Timeline isn't created to mesh the UNSC and Systems Alliance together or the history of both universes, but allows both exist.

>I didn't exactly want to villainize the UNSC or ONI. Honestly, the UNSC is more in control than the Systems Alliance and has its pros and cons, as well as the Systems Alliance having their own strengths and faults.<br>The two won't exactly collide, but as shown here, at least the Shadow Broker is aware of ONI's exploration.

><strong>

\*\*For the Halo side, I put it ten years forward (Halo 4 never happened folks), but kept the familiar faces. I kept Admiral Parangosky as head of ONI because I honestly couldn't imagine Osman running it with the same efficiency, and technically, Parangosky is only a hundred and six

>I also sized up the minor character Rear Admiral Ned Rich, if you might remember him from Ghosts of Onyx has a particularly insubordinate member of ONI's Beta Five. In this particular fan fiction, he cleans up his act and actually becomes the competent ONI Officer obviously expected.<br>And Halsey has spent a decade rotting away due to Parangosky's hypocritical moral crackdown and is thus quite bitter. \*\*

\*\*On the Mass Effect side, I haven't touched much yet, though from the start of choosing just where to place the story, I wanted to tell a sub-plot of how difficult it is for Shepard to simply stop being Shepard and leave the Normandy behind.

><strong>

\*\*I also don't want this to be a one hit chapter, sort of thing. I've now got a lot of time on my hands, and I intend on getting at least another chapter done. Drop a review and tell me what you think of the story.

><strong>

\*\*PS: The ENDING shall not be mentioned... ever...

><strong>

## 2. Prologue II: A Message Written In Blood

\*\*Prologue Part II: A Message Written In Blood

><strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong><strong>"It doesn't matter what your enemy's intentions are, only their capabilities." - Admiral Margaret Orlenda Parangosky<strong>\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><em>Communication Channel Theta, Communicue  
57463G7<br>Classification Level: Psi  
><em>

\_Sender: CINCONI  
>Location: Specific Location Classified, Sydney, Australia,  
Earth<br>\_

\_Receiver: Rear Admiral Anthony Curtyn  
>Location: UNSC Loki, Instigator Class Prowler, Coordinates  
Classified<br>\_

\_For the last few months, you're efforts in both gathering material for Beta-Three's TS&E Divisions as well as subjects for Project Ragnarok are commendable, but following the declaration of Killed in Action for Agent Neil Scott, I have decided to suspend all infiltration activities in every sector.\_

\_Do not be mistaken, I do acknowledge that you were able to prevent the capture of Agent Neil's remains, as well as maintain our hidden presence, though the risks of these recon missions have become greater than first assumed. Seeing that all operations thus far have been concluded, from this point forward I have decided to withdraw all your Prowlers from recon and field operation activities.

><em>

\_The Charnara Incident; as it has been labelled, and all personnel responsible, have been reassigned or terminated, and the information is now strictly under classification level Omega, \*\*never \*\*to be discussed, on any circumstance prior to any, if necessary, declassification. I have further ordered the termination of all auxiliaries deployed during any operations over the last three months in former Covenant space. Though this seem a harsh measure, all of this is a necessity to leave no trace of our presence.  
><em>

\_From this point forward, any technology recovered will be seized by Beta-Three. All unmanned recon drones are to be apprehended by Section III, and destroyed following the complete erasing of any data present. All Artificial Intelligence programs will undergo memory erasure, and shall be immediately reassigned. The Spy Buoy Network currently accessing the Extranet shall be left intact, but will no longer be connected to any of our primary communication channels.

><em>

\_And I regrettably find it necessary to inform you Anthony, that your position as head of ONI's Prowler Corps, shall henceforth revoked as of the 23rd of August, and the entire Prowler Corps shall undergo necessary cleaning by Section Zero the following month. By 11th of November, you shall be reassigned to Section Three, Spec-Ops Warfare Group.  
><em>

\_Best of regards, Admiral Margaret Parangosky\_

\* \* \*

><p>As much as she hated to admit it, this was exactly the one place in the galaxy she wanted to be, however the Vice Admiral's plan went down.<p>

She was back on Research Station Trevelyan, though it seemed now it was more than just a passing curiosity of ONI. They had installed permanent facilities, obviously realizing the potential of utilizing the Shield World as a hidden base. This place was more secret than Onyx ever was, and of course, the perfect choice to undertake the Vice Admiral's new program.

"I suppose that I should know were exactly were getting these subjects from, Ananke?" Doctor Halsey questioned the translucent orange AI that floated beside her. She didn't particularly trust AI's that were not of her own creation, but Ananke seemed welcoming enough.

"The Office of Naval Intelligence has recruited a number of contractors to fulfill the role of recruitment," Ananke answered, her voice remarkably smooth, "in addition, a majority of subjects had been purchased from various trading sites that ONI has successfully infiltrated."

Doctor Halsey arched her eyebrow at that. They were purchasing slaves then, and she guessed that was along the lines of morally acceptable when it came to ONI. "So that's our 'diverse' source? They bought slaves"

"Indeed. Though Vice Admiral Rich prefers to use the term 'liberated'." Ananke responded, the AI of a Greek Goddess returning a nod of acknowledgement. "He sees it fitting that they shall be the ones to advance our cause."

"How sentimental..." Halsey muttered as she looked down at the data pad in her hand. "Two hundred and fifty subjects planned thus far?"

"That is correct. There will be divided into fifty teams of five for training exercises," Ananke explained. "Each of these teams will never have more than one member of a specific species, with the exception of placing both one of our existing subject's with another Human subject from the Relay Systems."

"So not only does he want to train aliens, he wanted to group them all together?" Doctor Halsey questioned.

"When trained in such fashion, the Vice Admiral hopes that their loyalty will ascend beyond their own kind to that of their entire unit. Having any unit composed of a single species that is non-human, will alienate them from our command. Grouping them together, they will not be fighting 'for the humans', but fighting for their collective species."

"Good reasoning, but hell of a risk. I hope someone factored in that Sangheili are carnivores and they're used to eating mammals.." Halsey

commented.

"All considerations have been taken into factor, Doctor," Ananke nodded, data streaming in. "I've finished cyphering the information packets sent to us, and all the information within is now available. Possible Subject roster is now available."

"I'll review it now," Halsey scrolled over the new data transferred to her. "I'm noticing a pattern in the squad layout, though the fifth member doesn't follow it."

"Correct. Teams will be composed of one of the clone Spartans originally grown for this program, a Sangheili, and two other species from the newly uncovered Relay Systems: Turians and Quarrians; the later we have been informed was extremely difficult to acquire in sufficient quantities. All four species are recognized for having similar growth patterns, thus allowing us to recruit and train them from a roughly the same age group. We plan to have acquired fifty of each, giving the initial two hundred number. The fifth member is varied among different teams, composing of a specialist member which was either not able to be recruited in mass numbers, or didn't fit the exact requirements."

"So they are?"

"We have recruited twenty of the other Human, 'Biotics', at the sufficient age. Fifteen Salarians are also present, though instead of taking far too long, they would grow faster than the rest of the group. Then there are also fifteen Bartarians, which on the Vice Admiral's advice, were withdrawn to a minor number of candidates rather than filling a planned original fifty themselves. There were concepts for recruiting from amongst the other races, but they were either deemed physically unsuitable, mentally unsuitable or simply had too long age spans for us to train them properly."  
>Together, they form the additional fifty and have been placed as the fifth team member in all teams. Some teams may be cut down to four man teams if the fifth member is removed."<p>

"I reviewed the implications of the discovery of Biotic powers. To think we always disposed of Ezeo as a safety hazard instead of realizing its true potential..." Doctor Halsey muttered off into deep thought.

"Since we never invented Ezeo based Mass Effect Drives as they call them, we have never had a need to harvest or utilize Ezeo, the reason why we never uncovered it's true power," Ananke explained.

"On the subjects of the Biotics, I thought from the Codex's we acquired, that it stated they were significantly rare among the Human populace?" Halsey questioned. "How exactly did ONI get twenty?"

"It seemed that six, seven or more years ago, a faction known as Collectors placed a bounty on any Human Biotic traded to them. In an effort to claim the significant bounty, many slave traders exposed pregnant slaves to Ezeo, killing many but generating at least some Biotic potential offspring. By time this happened however, the Collector's bounty was no longer present as they were exterminated," Ananke told her, with no trace in her voice even slightly moved from her usual calm by such facts.

>"Since Biotic's abilities are natural and can be very dangerous,

this made them highly unreliable slaves, and slavers on the trading hub known as Omega, were willing to sell them to ONI Agents at a very low price," Ananke paused for a moment, before adding, "others were acquired through of bounty hunters."<p>

"Figures," Halsey simply answered, "this project was hardly abiding by Section 0's 'Moral & Ethical Conduct Guidelines' to begin with."

"Regardless, we believe that all two hundred and fifty subjects will be perfectly physically viable for the program by our starting date in three months." All subjects are within the ages of five years to seven, or that growth level equivalent among the non-Human subjects."

"That doesn't mean mentally, Ann," Halsey applied a nickname for the AI that just popped to mind; shorter than saying Ananke, "I wouldn't expect them to take to it as well as the Spartan III's or even the II's did. It's going to be hell just getting this thing started."

"Never the less, the non-human subjects are simply experiments. If they fail, we'll still have the seventy strong Human subjects," Ananke dismissed her concerns, "and the program will do, exactly what it was originally designed to do."

"Speaking of those subjects, I want to know more about these clones that they put together," Halsey replied. "Just what are they exactly?"

"Well, what I think is, that they're natural Spartans."

\* \* \*

><p>"The tidings of this conflict do not bode well with any, Arbiter" Imperial Admiral R'tas Vadam stood in front of a holographic tactical display board, three dimensional images of a burning colony before them. "Just when we thought we turned the tide on those blasted apes..."<p>

"This attack looks like the work of cowards," Thel Vadam stared down at the chaos, his expression grim. Both Sangheili were struck by what they seeing. "It reeks of the word of Kig'Yar... How much damage have they done?"

"My Ship Masters tell me that almost the entire colony of Engehios was razed," R'tas told him, unable to hide his disgust for the turn of events. "The Jiralhanae lead the assault, though a majority of the attackers were Kig-Yar. Special Operation's Officer N'tho 'Sraom, has stated in his report to me, that he believes them to be opportunists rather than fanatics or patriots, though all in service to either the still rogue Covenant aligned clans or Eayn's government. They struck from small vessel's fast and without any warning, hitting a majority of settlements. By time Fleet Master Kelik Nar'Seleni brought his fleet to the world, they had massacred more than two thirds of the people and fled.

>In his report, N'tho described evils that I dare not recite again here."<p>

"I have seen my fair share and will not shriek away from it like a

cowardly Doarmir about to be sheared of its fur," Thel responded. "Tell me all which they unleashed upon Engehios."

"They struck out settlements, slaying without pause. The Jiralhanae showed no mercy and looted wherever they went, eating their victims alive... but it was the Kig-Yar who were the more twisted. As they plundered and retreated, we believe they took young as captives, presumably to feed on alive or undertake worse acts upon them later on... their crimes sicken me."

"They are bold..." Thel simply muttered, "and soon they shall pay for their crimes in blood."

"I wholly agree, Arbiter," R'tas clenched his hands, as if already gripping a sword which to behead the next foe he saw. "Our retribution should be swift upon these beasts and mongrels. We have not seen such atrocities for over a decade since we crushed the last Jiralhanae alpha tribes..."

"An atrocity indeed..." the Arbiter looked upon the fallen colony. "All those responsible should face the might of our fleets. The Assembly of Kaidons shall fully agree with us. If we must wage war upon Eayn, then that is what we should do. The Jiralhanae have already lost everything they hold dear, but now it is time to put those Kig-Yar in their place."

"I propose that we glass the pirate's haven from orbit," R'tas proposed, slamming his hands together. "Your mercy to the helpless Jiralhanae colonies, I can understand, but Eayn harbors and gave birth to nothing more than a depraved society that thrives on their dishonest ways. The only way to deal with the Kig-Yar, is to exterminate the vermin."

"Perhaps..." Thel mused, "but I will not hastily consign a world to death ever again. We shall wreck retribution upon the Kig-Yar for this, I promise you that, though for the time being, we shall crush their enterprises, their ships and their holds. Burning more worlds shall only repeat past mistakes."

"As... as you say, Arbiter," R'tas bowed his head. "I must return to the Council immediately, to inform them of... your opinions regarding this crisis. I fear, brother, that you may not have all their confidences..." He turned, and hastily marched from the war chamber under Vadam Keep. Thel didn't bother watching him go, his gaze still resting on the hologram before him.

He was only one Kaidon, and while the rank of Arbiter was still de-facto head of state... his decision to turn over decisions to the assembly of Kaidon's in an act of limited democracy, may have might have well undone him. They, even R'tas as head of the military, were all bellowing for blood to be shed in vengeance for this, as is their way, but shedding blood may only instigate this conflict further. While the Kig-Yar deserved to burn in a thousand hells; if there ever was one as the Prophets once claimed, he knew burning Eayn would not end this, only prolong the fires of war.

They would all demand it, and R'tas would go through with it, with all Sangheili cheering it on... and there would be a lot more innocent blood spilled by time this was over.



\* \* \*

><p><em>Communique 758939G93, Information Package  
Beta-Nineteen<br>Communication Encryption: Psi-Omega  
>[DESTRUCTION IS ORDERED IMMEDIATELY ON COMPLETION OF STUDY. FAILURE  
TO DO SO, IS A CAPITAL OFFENSE]<em>

\_Sender: MIL AI 8275 [Alias: Ananke]  
>Location: Project V Network, Trevelyan, Onyx, Zeta Doradus  
System<br>\_

\_Receiver: Doctor Catherine Halsey  
>Location: Starford Facility, Trevelyan, Onyx, Zeta Doradus  
System<br>\_

\_\*The following is a complete analysis report of subject groups, from  
general information to calculated chances of subject success. CINCONI  
has approved release of highly sensitive information to this project  
in a limited format, placing this communique between Psi and Omega  
classifications [Attached File: Office of Naval Intelligence  
Classification Restructure of 2559 (Just in case you haven't seen the  
new structure already - Ann)]. These reports must immediately undergo  
destruction following their review. ONI reminds all personnel that  
failure to do so, is grounds for immediate termination and maximum  
punishment of execution.  
><em>

\_ \*\*Report begins...  
><em>

\_Subject Group Alpha  
><em>

\_Species Common Term: Unclassified  
>Species Scientific Term: Unclassified<br>Home World: None  
>Subject Group Number: 50 Subjects<br>Gender Variety: \*\*Y\*\*/N  
  
><em>

\_General Description: Subject Group Alpha consists of fifty  
artificially grown subjects specially created for the purposes of  
providing a ethically viable solution to recruitment for a Spartan V  
Program, as well as avoid the Flash Cloning Incidents of the II  
Program [See Attached File: Halsey Incident \*Error: File Blocked\*].  
While new reverse engineered technology has made the creation of this  
subject group possible, it was still a large financial undertaking,  
and therefore, all subjects within Alpha Group should be considered  
as valuable as their newly introduced counterparts.\_

\_\*Note: Subject Group Alpha will obviously never have any possible  
loyalty issues. Subjects have been already trained assertive and  
dominate, and will likely lead in roles such as squad leaders.  
Consider Program Head favor Group Alpha for command positions in  
order to maintain future stability.\_

\_Planned Upgrades: Major Upgrades Already Undertaken. Minor upgrades  
such as neural implants and various growth accelerators planned for  
introduction at acceptable age.\_  
><em>Motivation Level: Highly Motivated<em>  
><em>Subject Estimated Success Ratio: 100%<em>

\_Subject Group Beta

><em>

\_Species Common Term: Sangheili

>Species Scientific Term: <em>Macto cognatus<em>

>Home World: Sanghelios<br>Subject Group Number: 50 Subjects

>Gender Variety: <strong>Y<strong>/N

><em>

\_General Description: Group Beta is composed of fifty Sangheili subjects of both genders (See Attached File: Sangheili Social Structure by Professor Even Phillips). Acquisition was through Kig-Yar mercenary factions, who violently captured them, killing their parents in the process. Concluding this, ONI terminated the Kig-Yar mercenaries and placed blame with major Kig-Yar factions from Eayn. Subject group is thus unaware of any Human involvement in their abduction, a significant boon to efforts to bring them about to a positive line of thinking, as any hatred towards Humans taught by their parents has so far been outmatched by their hatred towards the Kig-Yar presently.\_

\_\*Note: Of all subjects, Beta have the most normalized upbringing compared to the rest of the subject groups, and unlike those others, have already inherited many of their parents traits and perceptions. While subjects can still likely be indoctrinated to the Program's intended views on their allegiance, their own views on subjects such as honor can most likely not be altered.\_

\_Planned Upgrades: Major Augmentation overhaul if subjects respond positively to program. Schematics for upgraded Sangheili 'super-soldiers' has already been drafted, and will theoretically be superior to their counter-parts.\_

><em>Motivation Level: Likely Highly Motivated<em>

><em>Subject Estimated Success Ratio: 80%-90%<em>

\_Subject Group Gamma

><em>

\_Species Common Term: Turian

>Species Scientific Term: Unclassified [See Attached File: System's Alliance Xeno Relations Report]<br>Home World: Palavan

>Subject Group Number: 50 Subjects<br>Gender Variety:\*\* Y\*\*/N

><em>

\_General Description: Gamma Group is the Turian Subjects. While most of our understanding from the newly encountered Relay species comes from their own Extronet communications, UNSC Artificial Intelligence have been able to assimilate all medical, historical and social information regarding all species. We have deemed the Turians as acceptable subjects, with a long record of having a proven militaristic nature. all subjects recruited are formerly slaves, both from birth or childhood, they are certainly obedient, and will likely respond well to training. If loyalty can be ensured, the subject group will make excellent backbone of individual squads.\_

\_\*Note: Turians are both socially and mentally obedient to superiors, but can also be exceptionally capable leaders. Group Gamma will

likely follow behind Alpha in number of appointed squad leaders in the group.\_

\_Planned Upgrades: Likewise, Major Augmentations to create a superior super-soldier variant has been drafted by AI's surveying Turian biology. Efforts to create such modifications have been undertaken allegedly by the Turians themselves in the past, but due to their own primitive medical technology, these efforts have failed.\_ \_We however, will likely succeed.\_

><em>Motivation Level: Moderately Motivated<em>

><em>Subject Estimated Success Ratio: 60%-85%<em>

\_Subject Group Delta

><em>

\_Species Common Term: Quarian

>Species Scientific Term: Unclassified<br>Home World: Rannoch

>Subject Group Number: 50 Subjects<br>Gender Variety:

\*\*Y\*\*/N\_

\_General Description: Group Delta is possibly the most risky group. All subjects are also former slaves, though this an undermining considering their poor health. Over the last two months, subjects recruited have undergone various medical treatments to restore them to sufficient health required to undertake the program. In addition, the subject group also has the lowest motivation, the children suffering severe physiological trauma from either separation or prior abuse. Many have undergone memory erasure procedures (Still as dangerous as it was prior in 2517, mind you - Ann), and recovered from said physiological issues, though for them and the others in their Subject group, some trauma still remains. While we have gone to the effort to supply them with newer improved environmental suits than the makeshift ones equipped to them during their slavery, they still are a minor handicap.

>Despite the number of reasons why they do not fit the program parameters, the Vice Admiral has remained insistent on their inclusion, primarily to their very high intelligence, and their usefulness as future infiltrators to get close to the closed Quarian society as well as highly advanced Geth.<em>

\_\*NOTE: While subjects have received multiple medical upgrades, as well as improved environmental gear, weak immune systems should still be considered. Quarian's are rarely kept as slaves by Terminus Pirates, and young Quarians even rarer. Following the outbreak of a recent Terminus Conflict, subjects should be considered as irreplaceable.\_

><em>\*\*NOTE: After reviewing recently published Extronet documents, the Subject Recruitment and Physiological Review Panel (Panel Member Aliases: Ananke, Melis, Cody, Bern and Hades. Panel Member Serial Numbers withheld), have noted the improvement upon physiological states of Quarian children paired with AI programs (See Attached File: Quarian-Geth relations). Subject Group Delta will most likely lead in number of AI carriers.<em>

\_Planned Upgrades: Like many technological fields, Relay Sector's medical technology is significantly in-superior to UNSC technology. Over the course of the Program, subjects will receive\_ \_upgrades that will decrease dependence on environmental gear. Augmentations will also increase physical capability, which only the Salarians rank

lower currently.\_

><em>Motivation Level: Severely Unmotivated<em>

><em>Subject Estimated Success Ratio: 33%-50%<em>

\_Subject Group Epsilon \_

\_Species Common Term: Human

>Species Scientific Term: Homo-Sapiens<br>Home World: Earth

>Subject Group: 20 Subjects<br>Gender Variety: \*\*Y\*\*/N\_

\_General Description: Subject Group Epsilon consists of the twenty Biotic subjects recruited for the are generally, as Human as we can expect them to be. They have all undergone physiological study, and while some are still as mentally resilient as Subject Group Gamma, others have received as such trauma as common amongst Group Delta, and have also been submitted to mental repair procedures. Their Biotic nature makes them both significant assets to the program, and our future efforts to study and understand how Biotic capabilities function.\_

\_\*NOTE: From our gathered understanding of Biotics, we know that these abilities vary among subjects. While some may never properly develop abilities that would prove an asset on the battlefield, others may rise beyond expectations.\_

><em>\*\*NOTE: With stolen Biotic Implant tech and our own greater understanding of neurological activity, we may eventually produce superior implants to Council equivalents.<em>

\_Planned Upgrades: Epsilon Subjects shall receive improved Spartan III grade Augmentations, as well, as mentioned above, Biotic Implants to further enhance their ability.

>Motivation Level: Varies From Moderately Motivated to Severely Unmotivated<br>Subject Estimated Success Ratio: 50%-100%\_

\_Subject Group Zeta\_

\_Species Common Term: Salarian

>Species Scientific Term: Unclassified<br>Home World: Sur'Kesh

>Subject Group: 15 Subjects<br>Gender Variety: Y/\*\*N\*\*

><em>

\_General Description: The Salarians are a minority group in the program, primarily due to the fact they are physically the weakest among the group, as well as having extremely short lifetimes of forty years. By time other subjects reach adolescence, Salarian subjects will be fully grown. They do have have their advantages however, in higher intellect and reaction time, though this speed is what costs them when it comes to life spans. While this hasn't removed them entirely from selection, considering all factors, this first class will be a testing point to deem whether the trade off is worth it.

>In terms of willingness to undertake the program, we theorize that they would be willing at least, Salarian emotional attachments are exceptionally rare and almost non-existent, even amongst young.<br>\_

\_\*NOTE: Zeta Subjects will most likely always excel intellectually

than all other subjects. Recommend preemptive drafting of extra curriculum content for Zeta Subjects.

>\*\*NOTE: Subjects within Zeta will prove excellent in the areas of Recon, Marksmen and Technological Specialists.<br>\*\*\*NOTE: Only male subjects appear viable for the role. Females are both extremely difficult to acquire, as well as socially different to more suitable, obedient male mindset in Salarians.

><em>

\_Planned Upgrades: Biology makes many physical improvements limited in scope. Augmentations will focus in areas to improve already established skill set. Experimentation with creating cybernetic upgrades to prolong short lifespans undertaken, though has a possibility of decreasing their ability as infiltrators.

>Motivation Level: Likely Highly Motivated to Moderately Motivated<br>Subject Estimated Success Rate: 75%

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\_Subject Group Eta

><em>

\_Species Common Term: Bartarian

>Species Scientific Term: Unclassified<br>Home World: Khar'shan

>Subject Group: 15 Subjects<br>Gender Variety: Y/\*\*N\*\* \_

\_General Description: the Bartarians form Subject Group Eta, a minority section. Originally intended as a fifty strong major subject group, social analysis and their current standing point in the galaxy, reduced this to a group of fifteen. While also like the previous four subject groups that they are slaves, ascent from that status is highly appealing to them, and shall prove significant motivation among the Subject group. From current investigations, we deem Bartarians are significantly in-superior to Human subjects, though they have a number of traits such as superior eye-sight as well as natural inherited skills that would make them exceptional infiltrators both in their own species and the rest of the Relay Sectors.

><em>

\_Planned Upgrades: Bartarian biology is also highly alike to that of Humanity, and will possibly receive Augmentations much alike to those of Subject Group Epsilon if indoctrination into program proceeds well.

>Motivation Level: Highly Motivated<br>Subject Estimated Success Rate: 90%-95%\_

\_Report Concluded

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\* \* \*

><p>Shepard didn't believe his eyes. For a second, he blinked, not wanting to even contemplate what he was seeing. He could feel Tali gripping his shoulder tightly.<p>

What they were shown before them was a nightmarish, hellish landscape, every stone scorched black, every last bit of flora burnt to a crisp. Where a river may of first run, now only a tinkle of

dirtied water polluted black now flowed by.

"I... I'm sorry for your loss, Captain F'ldia," Shepard finally muttered. His mouth felt dry, even though he was still wearing his helmet.

"...Thank you, Commander," The Quarian Marine Commander noted, "this, is a very sad day for my people. It will also be a very harsh wake up call."

Indeed, it would. By the now dead river, the scattered remains of a settlement still stood, though it looked like the remains would fly off in the harsh wind as if it had never been there. Between the destroyed structures and wrecked vehicles, Shepard could spy blackened bones...

"This... a land assault? This looks like an orbital bombardment!" Tali exclaimed, her voice mired in bitterness. "How could this happen?"

"We wern't prepared for anything like this, that's why..." F'ldia admitted to them. "For the last six years, we assumed that the rest of the galaxy would leave us alone beyond the Perseus Veil, just as they did the Geth. I guess we were wrong."

"I didn't think anything would happen like this," Shepard shook his head. While many would assume there would have been higher security, here of all places, he personally knew from observing the system many times that Rannoch was far more vulnerable than assumed. With the Geth Fleet instead stationed in the nearby Far Rim Cluster, and a majority of the Quarian Fleet dedicated to rebuilding and reconstruction, the now planet based Quarians unable to spare the resources to maintain anything beyond a necessary small fleet of Cruisers. That fleet couldn't watch every inch of space at once, and since the planet didn't even have that great a number of satellites or sensors as of yet.  
>Though, never once had he thought someone might see that and exploit it.<p>

"Shocking, I know," F'ldia nodded, "we're still scouring through it all, trying to figure it out. We've uncovered more remains though, not just our dead."

"So... who did this?" Shepard questioned. The only response the Quarian had was to show him what looked like an armor piece, sort of like a chest plate, though it's size and shape didn't look like it would fit anything near Human or even humanoid, though that was probably because of its broken state. The armor was burnt black, and there points in it where Shepard once assumed there were spikes when the armor was in better condition. The armor was wrecked, obviously caught in an incendiary explosion itself.

"We don't recognize this gear ourselves..." F'ldia told him, "though, going to great lengths, we found the information. This armor is Bartarian manufactured, new high end gear used in the Terminus Systems."

"The Terminus?..." Shepard questioned, gritting his teeth.

"Yes, and any surviving pieces don't have any visible color scheme,"

F'ldia explained. Shepard was well aware of the concept of the Terminus's pirates and mercenaries 'going black' as they called it, painting over all their gear for operations they didn't want traced back to them. "It looked like they didn't want to be traced, but before they departed after the raid, they dropped something."

"Something that could lead us back to them?" Shepard imminently asked. Even if he didn't find out, he'd personally go to Omega and tear through each little faction at a time until he got answers...

"They dropped some kind of box, reinforced with advanced metals just to make sure it survived the incendiary explosive they detonated when they supposedly left. We don't even know what it is yet, though. You'll have to ask Admiral Gerrel when we return."

"Yes..." Shepard nodded. "I will."

\* \* \*

><p>"This attack was the result of exactly what I stated when the number of active ships was reduced," Admiral Han Gerrel shouted, gripping the railing he stood in front of. Before them, the assembled Conclave couldn't even sit, all standing and shouting themselves, Gerrel simply being the loudest voice. "we need to return more ships to orbit!"<p>

"That would not be necessary," the Representative of the Geth, a towering Prime platform answered, "the Geth Fleet could return a detachment to Rannoch. This intrusion exactly is why we hesitated to remove our Fleet from the star system to begin with."

That broke into even more argument. Some thought they needed the Geth's support again. Others didn't exactly want an entire Geth Fleet in orbit. The pointless debate continued, and Shepard gritted his teeth further from just watching. Some people never stopped being beyond stupid.

"Enough!" Shala'Raen demanded, "the Conclave will return to order immediately!"

The crowd slowly grew quieter, though they didn't exactly settle. They had been scared, and were all threatened. They weren't the only ones shocked by this. He still felt Tali beside him, nervously still clutching her own hands. He recalled their return on the Shuttle.

\_"Keelah..." was all she could mutter after witnessing the destruction of the Kovoso Settlement. "What..."\_

\_"I didn't see it coming either..." Shepard admitted.  
><em>

\_"I still can't just believe... why!? What did that accomplish? Why would anyone do such a thing?" Tali questioned, distraught. \_

\_"I don't know, Tali..." Shepard leaned forward and grasped her hand. "but this won't happen again. I won't let it..."  
><em>

\_"But what if... what if this is our fault?" Tali questioned.

><em>

\_"Our fault?" Shepard's eyebrow's perked up. Their arrival may of coincided two days after the attack, but it was hardly relevant.

><em>

\_"If this attack was from Terminus Pirates... raiders. We're attacked them so many times... what if this was pay back?" She questioned, and Shepard's eyes darkened. Yes... that was possible... he didn't give a response, he simply stared at the floor, clenching his fists...

>"No! It's our fault together, not yours alone!" Tali quickly told him, realizing what she was saying, "this... you shouldn't feel guilty about this! Just... please, forgive me for what I said."<br>\_

\_"I..." Shepard stopped, and remained silent for the rest of the trip.

><em>

"The admiralty is already considering any possible actions in response to this, but we will not act hastily!"

"Then how do we know something like this won't happen again? We should blockade the Relays now! Stop anyone from coming into the system!" One member of the Conclave demanded, setting off a collective cry of support. Honestly, the same attack would never be carried twice, the first itself a daring and bold move, a second just plain suicidal.

"No further actions will be suggested! The actions of the fleet remain within the jurisdiction of the Admiralty. This meeting is adjourned!" Admiral Raan's voice was straining itself to call over the noise, and eager to end this mess. The Conclave were once again quiet for a moment, murmuring amongst themselves, before reigniting the fires.

"That is not good enough!" One shouted. "Everyone in an entire settlement is murdered; men, woman and children, and your doing nothing about it! We demand that the Admiralty immediately takes action to defend Rannoch!"

"You do not get to make demands of the Admiralty, Repre-"

"Then perhaps it's time for a change, then!"

Shepard groaned, not knowing how longer he could take watching this. All this infighting, inaction, while they were left doing nothing.

"This meeting is concluded!" Raan shouted again. "All representatives will clear the chamber, now! Or be cleared by the guard!"

\* \* \*

><p>They walked through the corridors of the Quarian's central



government building, an old pre-Morning War structure that had survived the hundreds of years and the war to retake Rannoch. The building was ancient, and the colorless silver stone that it was carved out of seemed to amplify Shepard's own repression of his emotions.<p>

They were led to the offices of the Admiralty, and stood in a wide meeting room, large enough for the Admiralty of five.

"The politics..." Zaal'Koris muttered, "there's a lot of blood spilled on this, and everyone's now wanting a lot more spilled. It's not like we can invade Omega because of this!"

"Regardless, I do believe a retaliation of some sorts is necessary," Admiral Xen stated. "A strike against any pirate faction neighboring the Perseus Veil could easily appease the Conclave."

"and-"

"That's hardly what we should do," Tali interrupted that line of thought. "Attacking the Terminus Systems won't bring back any of the dead."

"Yes," Admiral Gerrel nodded, "it won't, but what it will do, is stop more from dying!"

"It's-"

"I believe, Admiral Zorah, you don't exactly understand the gravity of the situation," Gerrel almost growled in response, "You have never spent more than a month at a time on Rannoch, so how would you know-"

"Enough!" Raan interrupted. "You go too far, Gerrel! All those six years, she has spent working to stop threats like this!"

"Perhaps that's what caused this to begin with," Admiral Gerrel answered, "I told us that we'd only endanger ourselves by allowing Zorah here into talking us into supporting the Alliance's crusades in the Terminus!"

"Gerrel." Shepard finally stepped forward, his voice completely devoid. "Shut up."

"You! How dare you even-"

"No!" Shepard interrupted. "I thought you would have actually learned something, but you're the same blood thirsty dog as always! Maybe you should be quiet and pay some respect."

"This is outrageous!" Gerrel simply shouted. "You have no place to dare even demand anything!"

"But he's right," Admiral Koris interrupted. "We can barely keep Rannoch together, much less fight a war against the Terminus. Going out there hungry for blood won't do us any good and will only place our people further in danger."

"So what?" Gerrel demanded. "We submit and do nothing? If we let these scum get away with this, they'll simply come back again! We

need to fight back!"

"That's still the intended plan," Xen calmly stated. "If every in the room would please remember, the means to do so is right in front of us."

Xen tapped the small metal cube sitting in the middle of the them on a podium. Shepard remembered the salvaged box mentioned by Captain F'ldia earlier.

"So just what's in here?" Shepard questioned, looking at the scorched metal box.

"Opening it, reveals a neural interface device of some sort," Xen told him, reaching in and showing him an object...

A Grey box.

"I recognize it. It's a Grey Box," Shepard spoke, amazed. How exactly did a Grey Box factor into all of this and how and why did Terminus raiders drop one, much less acquire one? Grey Box's were highly illegal memory storage devices only used by top Alliance spies and scientists; and also thieves in one case.

"A Grey Box?" Admiral Raan questioned.

"A sort of encrypted interface, for storing memories," Shepard explained. "I've seen them used before. Used for storing highly valuable information."

"I figured just as much," Xen nodded. "We've already staged attempts to understand it, but it appears this 'grey box' technology is not intended for Quarian use, and therefore we have been unable to understand it."

"Then I'll use it," Shepard instantly agreed. "Grey Boxes are Human technology. I'll be able to understand it."

"Shepard?" Tali whispered to him, unsure of this. There was no way of telling what a Grey Box could contain.

>He ignored her caution however. This Grey Box could be the one thing that could give them a lead. It would help him avenge those hundreds slaughtered... possibly because of him. This was on his shoulders.<p>

Shepard took the interface from Xen, and already began connecting it to his head. He'd helped Kasumi utilize her own Grey Box and he understand just how the interface worked.

"I'll activate the box," Xen told him. "if you are able to understand any of it, it would be a great assistance."

"They have encryption, as well, don't they?" Tali questioned. "Will you be able to use it?"

"Our only chance rests with me able to do so," Shepard answered, equipping the last of the interface, "Seeing as they left it, I doubt they put a password on it. I'll do my best."

"I'll activate it now then," Xen tapped into the console in front of

her, and the interface powered up... Shepard opened his eyes and found himself standing over an endless ocean.

\_He turned, looking for anything, something to show that he'd indeed been able to access the Grey Box correctly. He stared off into the endless distance, wondering if this was what he was supposed to be seeing, or perhaps that the Grey Box wasn't decrypted. Shepard suddenly recognized the familiarity of this place... a voice, a horrible voice, finally manifested.

><em>

\_"If you have found this message, then you now know of the demise of your pitiful settlement..."\_

\_Everything around him changed. Now he was standing in the midst of the destroyed Quarian settlement of Kovoso... ashes swirled around him, and he was standing amongst dozens of corpses of innocents.

><em>

\_"Know this is only the beginning," the voice announced and Shepard couldn't bear to place it.

><em>

\_Leviathan.

><em>

\_"Know that we shall no longer, shall our kind wage war against the lesser races from the cowardice of the shadows. This is an open declaration of war, between my kind; the apex race, and you disgusting rabble. Soon, our thralls shall come to destroy your pathetic planet, and your machines."

><em>

\_Shepard saw now ranks of mercenary soldiers, marching in perfectly straight lines over the battered and destroyed landscape. They wore the armor of the Blue Suns, with an Omega Station insignia on their arms.

><em>

\_"No..." Shepard shook his head, and upon his words, his memories rearranged the landscape around him to take him deep under the seas, and back into Leviathan's lair. The massive titanic creature rose before him, prodigy of the Reaper's aloof creators. It's giant eyes stared him down.

>"Whatever your planning... I'll stop both you and your thralls!" Shepard shouted at the Leviathan.<br>\_

\_"Your resistance is futile," what he was facing wasn't the real Leviathan or anything with contact to him. The Grey Box only had a packaged message, a memory to plant in the minds of all who witnessed it.

>"now, we shall complete the extermination of the machines, and restore order to the galaxy. Submit now, and we may spare your species so that you may better further our righteous cause."<br>\_

\_"I'll stop you..." Shepard muttered to himself, trying to believe that he could.

><em>

\_"The Darkness Grows..."\_

He opened his eyes again, and he was standing where he was before. Still sitting where they were, the four Quarian Admiral's still waited for him to return his findings. Tali gripped his shoulder.

"So... what did you see?" Tali spoke softly.

"That we have only one option left to us: go to war."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterward:<strong>

\*\*I was pleasantly surprised from the response to the publication of the first chapter, and I carefully read through all the reviews and messages. When I published the first chapter, I honestly didn't exactly know every last bit of how the story would play out. I wanted to leave room for some suggestions from readers, since it always helps.

><strong>

\*\*Though, after reading through the many suggestions, I think I picked up a good idea of what's wanted in future chapters. I've now drafted a story outline, and decided to start with a three-part Prologue series. \*\*

\*\*Leviathan made sense to become an antagonist (For the Prologue at least..).

>Why the Leviathans wage war and not just take the easier route in launching more mind control balls? That shall soon be sorted out in Part III of the Prologue, which I have already typed up, for release in a couple of days time (I don't want to leave you waiting long).<br>\*\*

\*\*If you have any questions, suggestions, or feedback, just drop a review.\*\*

### 3. Prologue III: Motives Above Scrutiny

\*\*Prologue Part III: Motives Above Scrutiny  
><strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em><strong>"They understood the universe in ways we never will. We can't unlock their secretsâ€"but now, apparently, we can destroy all they ever made. That's what I call progress." -  
Didact<strong>\_

\* \* \*

><p>The fires were so close that Shepard could feel the unbearable heat through his helmet, sweat rolling down his forehead. He raised his M-8 Assault Rifle and fired it at his nearest target as he charged out of the flaming building. The shots smashed through the Bartarian's shields and his own Phaeston Assault Rifle was fired off

into the air as he fell.<p>

His allies continued to follow him, a mismatched militia of Loyalist Terminus Forces. In Omega's dark skies, fires burned from nearly every district. Shepard's heart was pumping and he was full of adrenaline. For the first time in six years, he was on a major battlefield.

"Commander! Gunships incoming!" A Bartarian mercenary shouted to him. Shepard saw them. A squadron of three Gunships soared over the burning streets in front of them, coming around as they were spotted.

"They're coming for us! Scatter and find cover!" Shepard shouted, and they broke apart as chain-gun riddled the metal streets. Almost half of the Loyalist troops following him were cut down as the Gunships passed over. A nearby warehouse exploded into a fireball as a Gunship launched its rockets.

"Dammit! Stay down!" Shepard instructed, pressing himself against a wall as gunshots flired past. The gunfire ended, though he could hear the Gunship's engines growing louder "They're coming around to drop troopers!"

Blue Suns mercenaries rappelled down into the streets, assault rifles blazing. The Leviathan enthralled mercenaries hit hard and ruthlessly, and the strategy seemed to work, quickly butchering the remnants of their militia. One of the Gunship's overhead took a rocket to it's back fin, sending it swiveling out of control and crashing into the urban Omega below.

Shepard still had his Assault Rifle raised, and opened fire at a group of Blue Suns coming around the corner. His Tech Armor starved off their return fire, long enough for him to unleash a wave of Biotic energy and send the group on a collision course for a nearby brick wall.

It was hell, pure chaotic warfare. They had been fighting like this for five days, ever since Shepard had brought the Normandy to Omega along with an allied fleet of Quarrians and Geth. After tense negotiation, Aria T'loak eventually allowed them to hit the mercenary factions responsible; while still not buying the story that they had been enthralled by aquatic alien squids, had given her support. It was a good thing Shepard had already saved this station once before from Cerberus and Reapers, because nobody else in the galaxy would have been able to call a favor like that.

>As for the Leviathan's forces, they consisted of a number of mercenary factions, primarily the Blue Suns and several lesser factions that they were united with.<p>

He had first expected a swift strike, a quick apprehension of the Sun's local leadership and a breakdown of their organization here on Omega soon after. The galactic wide Blue Suns Organization had already disavowed their Omega Division, trying to distance themselves from their indoctrinated counterpart as quickly as possible.

>What originally had been a one day operation, got drawn out when the Leviathan's forces practically began waging an open war on the rest of Omega. The head of the local division, a Blue Sun's Commander by the name of Ajax Suleiman, had practically disappeared from plain sight. Hastily after the attacks on the neighboring districts, Aria

had called the remaining factions of Omega together to dispose of the attacking rogue Suns; thus the 'Loyalist' army.<p>

"This is Shepard! We've drawn the Gunships out! Initiate the next phase!" Shepard called into his Comm. The remaining Blue Sun's air fleet was right above them now, the entire unit focused on repelling the Eclipse and Blood Pact factions in their joint assault.

Geth Frigates from long range, on the less dense rim of Omega's umbrella, began hyper-accurate GUARDIAN defense battery bombardment. The hailstorm of pin-point shots blasted every hostile aircraft out of the sky. With their air support in fiery wrecks, the Suns mercenaries glared nervously to the skies before an order was given out to fall back to more fortified strongholds. Shepard was keen not to give them the chance.

He swung himself around the corner, his M-8 Avenger bringing down two of the closest Turian mercenaries. His OMNI Tool unleashed an overload of electricity, which stunned the entire squad he was facing. After that, he unleashed a Shock Wave of kinetic energy which sent the Suns flying back. He swiftly moved forward and began to fire off a burst of Assault Rifle fire into the fallen Blue Suns.

"Wait! Please!" one of the wounded Blue Suns raised his bloodied hands in surrender, "don't kill me! We're only following orders..."

Shepard paused for a moment of hesitation, but eventually decided to go through with it anyway. 'only following orders', wasn't an excuse. It was all too easy to imagine them as the pirate scum that had burnt Mindoir, raided ships, or assaulted Rannoch. For such crimes, they deserved no mercy.  
>As the man screamed, Shepard raised his Avenger and fired a burst that silenced it.<p>

"Keep moving deeper," Shepard spoke into his Comm as further allied Eclipse mercenaries moved by, supported by Mechs. While still the same level of scum as the Suns, he was hesitatingly forced to accept again, that they were on his side. The Eclipse didn't respond well to the Sun's attack on their territory.

\_"Shepard-Commander. Recent Intel acquisition points to nearby Blue Sun's stronghold, hidden under a nearby structure. We've detected thirteen life signs within," \_a voice that could only be a Geth called over a Comm channel to him. Of all the people of the galaxy, Shepard had a high appreciation of the Geth. While they had been hesitant at first to join with the Quarians again at first, insisting they were 'no longer tools of war for the creators', when Shepard had revealed the Leviathan's involvement, they had willingly joined the cause. The collective consensus of the Geth understood the severity of the situation.

"Can you mark it for me?" Shepard asked.

\_"Uploading coordinates to your system's... complete." \_The Geth; or rather the collective intelligence of an entire Frigate's worth of Geth, responded. Shepard saw the location of the Blue Sun's stronghold at least eight hundred meters south of him. \_"We are dispatching additional infantry to assist." \_

"Roger, that," Shepard nodded. He could already see on of the Geth Frigate's moving deeper into Omega's structure, piloting itself carefully closer to the station to launch mobile combat platforms to the warring districts below.

Shepard turned, and motioned for the nearby militia; various recruited citizens of Omega who had been forced into the fight by the Leviathan's thralls assaults, to follow him. The Blue Suns underneath must have been panicking, because now their hidden under surface facility was now completely located in uncontested Blood Pact turf.

The structure it was located under had been completely flattened, though Geth platforms soon arrived to dig through to very thick and heavily sealed bunker doors. A Geth Destroyer Platform used a plasma cutter to break the seam, before reaching in and tearing the doors outward. The second it did, it's shields flared as the Suns within made a desperate stand.

"This is a bunker! Control your shots! We may be able to capture important personnel!" Shepard shouted as a squad of Geth Troopers began to move into the bunker, their Pulse Rifles eliminating the defenders effectively. Shepard himself marched down in there, following the Geth. The enthralled troops fought well, but they were quickly pushed back and trapped in the small bunker complex.

"Shepard-Commander. We read two remaining life signs in the next room," a Geth Trooper reported as they moved to the door. "We theorize the next room is a commander center. Possible presence of command personnel are high."

"Noted. Go non-lethal. We need information from someone down here," Shepard nodded. He slammed himself into the door, flinging it wide open.

All that stood before him was a shocked Blue Sun's mercenary, which he instantly crashed into and sent tumbling to the floor. Shepard had seen enough Blue Suns over his lifetime to know their ranking codes, and he spotted the imagine which designated the man as an operations commander.

"You!" He reached down and grabbed the merc's neck with one hand. He knelled down on the fallen man, pointing the Predator Pistol in his other hand at his face. "You'll answer my questions!"

"Yes!" the merc spluttered, choking. "Whatever you ask!"

"Who's controlling this operation! Who's your leader?" Shepard questioned as a squad of Geth Troopers stood behind him, exchanging strange scratching noises that he recognized as their communications working at maximum speed, used only for communicating with other platforms at close proximity.

"Ajax Suleiman! Don't you already know that?" The Sun's mercenary shouted at him.

"I didn't mean Ajax. Does he have any sort of artifact, anything strange about him?" Shepard demanded to know.

"Artifact? I don't know what you're talking about!" he denied any knowledge.

"I'll ask-

"Do not bother yourself with him, Commander." A voice suddenly announced, and the Geth exchanged a quick chatter of cries as they searched for the source.

From a concealed doorway, a man in Sun's armor walked towards him. Shepard recognized him from the reports, the one they were searching for.

>"Ajax Suleiman," Shepard took his foot off his prisoner and turned to face the Blue Sun's commander and chief on Omega.<p>

"Yes, his mind is mine now... my kin speak highly of you, Commander Shepard," Ajax announced, and with a chill, Shepard knew he wasn't speaking to a mere mercenary. He was possessed by a Leviathan. It's voice was far softer than the one he knew however, less booming. It was another individual entirely.

"Then you'll know that your campaign is over! Once were done with Omega, we'll go back to your little ocean world and finish what the Reaper's started!" Shepard announced, staring at the Leviathan. He tapped his helmet, wondering if the camera he installed within was operating. This time, he'd have more than solid evidence.

"We have already long departed upon a raft of corpses," the Leviathan mocked. "if we wished to conquer your kind, we would do so without a single shot fired. This conflict on this station, was instigated for the single purpose of advancing our cause."

"Yea, your not big fans of Synthetics, I get it." Shepard grumbled. "How did attacking the Quarian's get what you wanted? Why indoctrinate mercenaries and attack at all?"

"You can not comprehend the majesty of our great plans for the galaxy," it continued, sounding very much alike to its creations, "we did not begin this conflict, but we controlled it to take it to a route we deemed acceptable, to better safeguard the future of all, as is the role of our Mantle. You have done exactly as we wanted you to do. This war is now over."

"You don't just get to decide that!" Shepard shouted at the possessed thrall. "You've started this war, but we'll finish it! I swear I will not stop until you pay for all the lives you've taken."

"Then prepare to spend the next centuries chasing an enemy that does not show itself, Commander." Leviathan answered. "Your war is with the Blue Suns and their allies, not our kind. My kin deliberately choose the Grey Box as the format of our message to you, knowing you would be the one; the great Commander Shepard, who would open it when the Quarian's couldn't. We purposely fabricated our claims of open war, knowing your primitive species would easily be driven to it. Everything you have done, has been to our benefit, and thus the benefit of the Mantle."

"I... don't believe you," Shepard told the thrall. "Why? What does this gain you?"



"Once again, you only ask questions we have already answered. We are the apex race, the rightful bearers of our predecessors Mantle. It is our duty to safeguard the galaxy, to protect the lesser races from themselves. We are not your enemies, Commander. We only now seek to shepherd the younger races, to atone for our failures. "

"Safeguard the galaxy?" Shepard questioned. "This... forget this. All you do is speak nonsense and hypocrisy! You're killing organics, not saving them!"

"Then this meeting is at an end. \_The darkness shifts, Commander, for where it once was before, it is no longer.\_"

Following that, the Leviathan's thrall simply lost consciousness and tumbled to the floor. Ajax now probably had the mental state of a vegetable, along with probably every other Blue Sun on Omega who could have given further answers.

Shepard holstered his pistol, turning and leaving.

\* \* \*

><p>"This was hardly an ideal conclusion, Shepard," Aria T'loak told him, glaring with complete disdain. "I should have never allowed you to step foot on my station to begin with. You started a damn war that set this place on fire all over again!"<p>

"It was necessary, Aria. Those Blue Suns were indoctrinated, and this wouldn't have ended any other way," Shepard argued. "We've practically crushed them now. The Leviathans have withdrawn from their thralls and the remaining troops are surrendering."

"I don't buy that 'Leviathan' nonsense, honestly," Aria answered. "it just doesn't make any sense."

"I know," Shepard agreed. "But taking action was better than letting this continue to run out of control."

"Yea, well, it's several more gangs that won't be paying tribute anytime soon," Aria frowned, placing a glass back on the table in front of her. "It will be hell just getting this whole station back in order, and they'll be more hell when the Blue Suns try to muscle back into their old turf. A small territory shift is a problem, an all out war that see's the third largest holder evicted in a week is a catastrophe. If you do remember from six or seven years ago now, what happens when all the rabble group together, don't you?"

"Eclipse and Blood Pact won't have the manpower to hold their captured territories. Minor gangs will probably fill the gap," Shepard reasoned.

"It's a good thing you've already saved this station once before, Shepard," Aria replied bluntly. "So now, consider yourself and Omega even. Now, can you tell your \_esteemed \_Admiral Zorah to take your ships and troops, and get the hell off my station immediately."

\* \* \*

><p>"Shepard, I've informed the Council of your conclusion to the

Omega Campaign," Liara told him as he stepped into the Normandy's communication center. The Shadow Broker's hologram floated before him. "To say they're relieved that we're pulling out of the Terminus Systems, would be a very big understatement. I believe you've told the Quarians not to go through with bombarding the Leviathan's planet from orbit?"<p>

"They're not on Desponia anymore, Liara," Shepard told her. "The Leviathans moved out apparently. We might send a few scouts anyway. I don't exactly see how they all could have escaped that place."

"I wouldn't speculate what they're capable of," Liara answered, "if possible, we need to be able to track their movements, find their lairs."

"I don't..." Shepard placed his hand over his own mouth, contemplating before removing it, "I think this war is over, Liara. The Leviathans told me that they aren't interested in it, funnily enough, that destroying the Blue Suns on Omega was somehow part of a grander master plan to save the galaxy."

"That..." Liara shook her head, "is honestly the most strangest thing I've heard in a while... while your wording of their motives may not exactly be specific, do you really think that they meant it?"

"Honestly... I don't know. They spoke of some obligation, to safeguard the galaxy from chaos, that they'd inherited; a Mantle. They still seemed like they hadn't changed since I first encountered them on Desponia. I told them that I'd pursue them for what they did... they seemed confident nobody would find them for centuries to come," Shepard admitted.

"Well, that may just be true. If they've retreated to a whole new lair, then we'll probably never find a way to track them down to one ocean in the many billions across this galaxy," Liara commented. "Though, I'd like to know more about this Mantle. Maybe it has something to do with the Cycles."

"Maybe it's just more manipulation," Shepard responded, "I don't know what to believe anymore. For the whole last week, I've been swept off my feet... so much for my vacation."

"I'll go through your camera footage, watch it myself," Liara told him. "If the Leviathans is trying to throw us off their trail, we may need to give pursuit, but once again, we might just not be able to do so. Right now, you should really talk to the Council. They've been hammering to see you ever since Quarian ships showed up in the Omega Nebula. You know, they could revoke your Spectre status for this."

"Noted," Shepard sighed. The last thing he needed now was to face the Council over this. He needed his evidence ready to present. They still had the Grey Box and they still had his recording of the Leviathan speaking. It would be good enough, good enough to get them all off the hook for what happened on Omega but... that was all it could do really. If the Leviathans kept laying low, then there was nothing that he could ever do to find them.  
>"More importantly, I want to know their motives. Indoctrinating a Blue Sun's division and unleashing death and destruction at random

just to get it destroyed doesn't seem like protecting the galaxy.<p>

"Are... you all right?" Liara questioned.

"Honestly... far from it," Shepard admitted. "I know I acted hastily, got even more people killed... and I did exactly what the Leviathans wanted."

"I doubt that's true," Liara reassured him. "While they may be masters of plotting, I doubt they ever desired the destruction of thralls. Bluffing is simply another part of deception."

"Yea, but that still doesn't change what happened. This all happened because of me, because the Leviathan's wanted to provoke me into a conflict for their own interests..." He shook his head. "Sometimes, I think it would be better if I disappeared forever."

"That's far from true."

"Yea, well... every once and while, I feel that way..." Shepard answered. "I want you to keep digging through the Leviathan footage, see what you can find out. I want to know what they're up to."

Whatever it was, Shepard swore he'd find out.

\* \* \*

><p><em>Communique 4488373JK1<br>Classification Level: Psi

—

\_Sender: Vice Admiral Ned Rich  
>Location: UNSC Point Of No Return, Coordinates  
Classified.<br>\_

\_Receiver: Admiral Margaret Parangosky  
>Location: <em>Specific Location Classified, Sydney, Australia,  
Earth<em>  
><em>

\_Margaret,  
><em>

\_I'd like to correct some misconceptions about the incident involving the Engehios colony. While it was true, that the Kig-Yar mercenaries were in fact recruited through Agent Thompson, we never did plan an attack on Engehios colony and starting a full scale war between the Elites and Jackals. Nothing of the sort.  
><em>

\_I admit, we should have been more prepared for an event such as this. A large sum of resources was offered up to the Kig-Yar, in exchange for the subjects. Nobody with the exception of the Kig-Yar Ship Mistress knew of this deal. The Kig-Yar were insistent that she also be provided with the S\_anghelios Republic's fleet movements, in order to locate civilian ships that could be targeted in order to extract subjects with minimal fuss. After consulting with Rear Admiral Curtyn, we decided to provide the Kig-Yar with that resource.

>We did not expect, that they would share this Intel with the Brute rebels still fighting the Republic, to co-opt a raid on a Sangheili colony world. It was a completely unexpected turn of events. While it is true, we were partially responsible for this, it was never and far from, our intended outcome. The Kig-Yar leader had motives beyond the acquisition of payment, in specifically striking against the Sangheili.<em>  
><em>

\_\_In response, we had our operatives eliminate the Kig-Yar flagship, and the Ship Mistress, as well as extract the subjects. With her death and the destruction of that ship, does all evidence that could us to the Engehios raid perish. While the conflict now triggered is hardly beneficial to the UNSC, we must be thankful that it didn't turn out worse.  
><em>\_\_

\_\_I respect your decisions in response to this incident, though you should be aware of the true nature of the conflict.  
><em>\_\_

\_\_Yours truly, Vice Admiral Ned Rich\_\_

\* \* \*

><p>The corridors of the lower labs would have been eerily small to some, but to Halsey, the lower containment area reminded her of her laboratory back on Reach, in Castle Base under an entire mountain. While such secrecy wasn't required on a Shield World, the security it assured was a far better advantage.<p>

"Tell me, Ann, who are the adoptive parents?" Halsey questioned as she walked through an automated security checkpoint.

"What makes you think they have adoptive parents?" Ananke lifted an eyebrow.

"Well, they can't have spent six years in test tubes, and a child who spends their first six years devoid of any contact would definitely not have a mental state even close to what's required," Halsey commented. Ananke nodded, perhaps impressed by the conclusion.

"You may be correct in one regard, that they definitely received parenting, but they actually haven't seen the world since they were 'born', technically," Ananke told her.

"Hmm... virtual intelligence landscape then?" Halsey assumed, "I certainly hoped you've perfected that, because that can also be as damaging to the mind as six years of constant solitude."

"Your assumptions are rather accurate, Doctor," Ananke acknowledged. "Since they've been of infant stage, we have been raising them through a artificial simulation run by a series of my sister AI's here at this facility. Our latest technology is far more advanced than any latest ONI setup you would have seen during the Covenant War. The latest virtual simulations have actually been upgraded and improved through reverse engineered Forerunner tech."

"Now that is interesting," Halsey nodded. "But if we were to pull them out of the simulations, how much would they notice the

difference?"

"ONI has possessed picture perfect simulation technology for years now, Doctor. Even our most basic combat simulators for Operatives have no discernible difference to the real world as we know it. Since a child's mind is hardly aware as an adult, I do believe that they'd completely miss any of the noticeable faults in the simulation world."

"What an age we live in," Halsey muttered, "now I can have lingering paranoia that I'm still on some distant space station being tested for our I would really react to undertaking another Spartan Program..."

"If so, I would put in a good word for you, Doctor," Ananke gave a grin to that comment, as they finally entered the containment area. There were pods assembled in lines of ten, with five rows. This was their fifty clones then.

"So, I assume they're all totally medically stable?" Halsey asked, approaching the nearest containment pod. Inside, a completely dark haired boy of six years of age lay staring back at her; eyes darting side to side, but perhaps totally unaware of her presence. He looked far more stronger, far more fit than a child who's literally never taken a step in their life should be.

"Medically stable, completely," Ananke confirmed with a nod. "in addition to being perfect creations, they have also received genetic engineering since growth began, numerous upgrades that your Spartan II's initially received. This makes a Argumentation stage later in life redundant with the exception of installing neural interfaces and certain enhancing upgrades."

"I'm more interested currently in the upgrades going on in there," Halsey pointed towards the head. "Ann, what exactly goes on in the virtual simulation?"

"Simulated childhood, really," Ananke told her. "The network is made up of ten smart AI's like myself, except totally dedicated to the simulation. Sometimes, I enter the simulation as well to undertake weekly development reports.

>While not exactly a normal upbringing, the AI's inside there do act as parents to the children, and are charged with instilling the correct attitudes in them. As far as my recent reports go, I believe that the network has taught them exceptionally well. Next week when we begin the program, I do believe they will take to it far more capably than any other subject type, and probably dominate when it comes to selection of squad leaders."<p>

"Natural Spartans indeed, Ann..." Halsey took her gaze away from the containment pod, slightly and secretly on the inside, distributed by the process. "Mind telling me what's with the twitching?"

"The simulation breaks the UNSC Artificial Interactions Code, by connecting the full entity of their brain to the simulation. The database available can simulate up to two hundred thousand different 'feelings' from touching any object from rocks to water across any part of the body. It also simulates pain, necessary as it is for their development. The... effects you are witnessing, are the results of a programming update we required. Early in the simulation, we did

not realize that they can also dream in their sleep, that neural activity carried on into the simulation, and the AI's continued with their programming and simulated all the following stimuli... the result was far from pleasing, and a few had to undergo targeted memory loss to repair their mental states," Ananke admitted.

>"Now, there are filters for such things, these twitches, the result of actions being actually sent into the body rather than into the simulation's input devices."<p>

"That is quite disturbing," Halsey commented, gazing into another containment pod, which contained a girl with hazel colored hair and shimmering blue eyes, which were darting side to side as if running scared, her mind tormented. She suspected there was a side to this simulated upbringing that Ananke wasn't divulging. "Though I assume it's sufficient preparation for the program."

"In eight hours, surgery will begin to remove the Simulation's connection to their minds and bodies, and readjust them to their proper neural network. In a week, they will be fully recovered and ready for program initiation," Ananke confirmed. Halsey continued to observe the subject before her, wondering just who's genetics had been used for these clones.

"That's good, Ann..." Halsey nodded and took a step back. She decided that was enough, and turned to leave. "I do believe were ready."

\* \* \*

><p>"The war on Omega was a travesty!" The Turian Councillor shouted, tightening his grip on the podium in front of him. "Of all people, we should have known beforehand what you and your allies intended to do!"<p>

"There wasn't time for it, Councillor," Shepard answered, standing on the petitioner's podium in the Citadel Council Chambers. "And if I had informed you, you all would have only slowed me down. Action had to be taken, and I did that."

"This situation could have been a whole lot worse if you didn't have the backing of T'loak, Shepard," The Asari Councillor told him calmly, "though, with Rannoch's forces withdrawn, I do believe that we should call and end to this conflict. Thus far, the Suns have at least been accepting of the purge of their Omega division, and they have maintained that the indoctrinated Suleiman acting on his own in the raid on Rannoch , but this situation is still delicate."

"More indoctrinated forces could still-"

"Our fleets are stretched thin as it is, Shepard," the Salarian Councillor cut him off, "while we do acknowledge the threat that the Leviathan's pose, there is simply nothing we can do about it now. If they show themselves in the future, then perhaps we can replicate the feat that led you to them to begin with, but for now, they haven't shown themselves and we have no way of tracking them."

"Honestly, this could have been a thousand times worse if the Leviathan's really did mean to wage galactic war," The Turian shook his head. "The fallout of this conflict will be felt for further decades to come! As illegitimate as it is, the largest trading port in the Terminus Systems has been decimated, we have the Quarian's and

Geth militarizing, and more conflict after this between the Terminus factions is now inevitable. Despite what you believe, after reviewing the reports, this Council has come to a different conclusion," the Councillor told him.

"It is the decision of this Council, that as punishment for instigating this unnecessary flash conflict, and aiding non-Council factions without any prior warning, that we revoke your Spectre status," The Asari Councillor announced, leaving Shepard stunned.

"This..." Shepard shook his head, "this is a mistake! I saved this-

"We are well aware of your achievements, Shepard," the Salarian Councillor told him, "but honestly, your time has passed. You went too far on Omega. Your personal crusade against raiders in the Traverse and Terminus, has gone on long enough. Your... ruthlessness has not gone unnoticed. Currently, you take away more stability that you provide."

"Will your Spectre status revoked, I must also inform you that the SR2 Normandy is no longer a Council Ship, and therefore it's armaments and equipment are illegal under the Council Civilian Vessels Act of 1876. It will be seized by the Systems Alliance, possibly to be released to you following a disarming of its more unnecessary weaponry or kept until you can comply," the new Systems Alliance Councillor told him; Dominic Osoba, too ashamed to look at him directly as he read out what was necessary. "I'm sorry, Commander, but with your Spectre Status, you are also discharged; honorably, from the Alliance."

"I... I know you'll all regret this," Shepard protested. "I did what was absolutely necessary."

"This decision was hardly easy for us, Shepard," The Asari Councillor admitted. "But also absolutely necessary. This meeting of the Council is adjourned."

The Council stepped down from their podiums and silently left the Chambers. Shepard remained still, gripping the railing on the petitioner's platform...

He didn't even know what to think. His Spectre status... revoked for good. The Normandy heading for either a permanent place in dry dock, or the complete removal of everything that made it capable. His Alliance ranking... no longer a Commander.

As he walked down the steps from the platform, descending down the tiers, groups of various diplomats and some old faces watched him go.

"Gah!" Urdnot'Krin; the Krogen Confederation Ambassador, grabbed his shoulder as he passed, "it's a sad day when these fools toss perfectly good warriors to the dust, Shepard. Know that Urdnot'Wrex, and the Krogan Confederation as a whole, still remember your greatness."

"Thanks..." Shepard nodded to the Krogen.

"The Collective was not in favor of your decommissioning, Shepard-Commander," A Geth Platform, a diplomat stationed to the Citadel, also stated. "Though it was not regrettably the decision of our consensus."

He didn't say anything further as he passed through, though one Turian was sure not to let him leave without a goodbye.

"Damn, Shepard," Spectre Vakarian shook his head, "the Council revoking your Spectre Status..."

"I understand, Garrus," Shepard admitted. "I did what I had to do, and paid the price."

"Don't you worry, I won't let your work go to waste..." Garrus told him. "If only all Spectres could learn from your example."

"Hah," Shepard gave a small bitter laugh, "if that was so, every last Spectre would be AWOL right now. Better than you play by the more civilized rules, for the more civilized time this is..."

"The Reapers may be gone, but the galaxy still is a damn hostile place," Garrus didn't agree. "You'll be missed, Shepard."

"Thanks, Garrus," Shepard nodded. "All I can hope is that you'll pick up the torch, right?"

"I'll do us both proud..." Garrus told him, "Goodbye, Shepard. I doubt this be the last time we meet, but take care of yourself out there."

"I'll see you around, Garrus..." Shepard grimly told him as he turned away and walked down the final flight of stairs...

\* \* \*

><p>"Keelah, Shepard..." Tali muttered, running up and throwing her arms around him. "The Council is mad! They're really going to revoke your Spectre Status over the fact that you saved us all?"<p>

"It's already done, Tali..." Shepard told her. "The attack on the Leviathan's indoctrinated Sun's was too costly, and the fact I left them in the dark about it just made things worse. I'm no longer a Commander, and I'm no longer allowed to fly the Normandy as it is today."

"It doesn't matter," Tali reassured him, "you had to give this up, one day... we can go back to Rannoch. Most people think you still a hero for leading the counter-attack on Omega. We can finally be together in peace..."

"You may be right..." Shepard nodded. As much as he wanted to just leave this place... he knew what needed to be done. "But I've got some things to see to first."

"Oh?" The Quarian questioned, "like what?"

"I need to see Ann Bryson, bring the remaining intact Leviathan artifact out of storage," Shepard answered. Perhaps, the artifact could reveal something to him, or Leviathan could contact him again,



giving him some trace...

"Then we should go see Bryson, right?" she asked.

"That's the thing... you should head back to Rannoch. You'll be needed there, trust me." Shepard told her.

"What? You want me to go all the way back to Rannoch, without you?" She questioned, startled. "Shepard, we-"

"I know," he grasped her shoulder, "you'll be needed there for the time being. I need to get in touch with Admiral Hackett, sort something out."

"Shepard, you promised me," Tali told him. "No more hiding from it. I've waited so long for us to finally just have some measure of peace... when your done with the artifact, you'll come straight back to Rannoch?"

"I promise," Shepard told her, drawing her close and standing face to face with her. He could see beyond her tinted visor, her eyes staring back at him, concerned. "I'll see you soon, Tali."

"I'll see you soon, Shepard..." Tali felt him let go of her hands, giving her a final embrace, before turning and walking back down the corridor, shoving his hands into his pockets as he disappearing back into the Citadel. She shed a single tear.

That was the last time she saw the man she knew as Shepard.

\* \* \*

><p>Doctor Halsey cleared her throat for a third time in the last five minutes. She continuously brushed her hand through her completely greyed hair, waiting.<p>

\_"As project head, you'll be in charge of every decision regarding the program's training undertaking. You know just what to do."\_

Rich just had to give this role to her. It was just a way of saying: get yourself together and your guilt buried.

She looked down at clipboard in front of her, holding good old fashion paper instead of a computer tablet or a newer holographic data pad. There were three pieces, even though only half a sheet contained the information relevant. All it was, was a copy of her original speech given on the initiation of the Spartan II Program.

\_"Do you know why I never lied to the candidates, Rich? I could have spun any number of lies to motivate them, to make them thankful of their place, but I didn't. I told them the truth, because in order to ensure their complete loyalty, I knew I couldn't lie to them."\_

She finally found the momentum to step forward into view, though unlike all those decades before, she didn't dare to meet any of their eyes. She marched silently to the podium and placed the sheets of paper down. Slowly, she lifted her gaze to the amphitheater in front of her. Behind every subject that sat before her, stood a handler holding a stun baton, though it was hardly necessary, all of them

obedient enough.

\_"You have been called upon to serve\_..."

She stood straight, and stared directly into the crowd. She spied the clone subjects easily enough, her still sharp eyes picking out the dark haired boy and hazel haired girl from her tour in the containment labs a week ago. They all led the front row, fifty of them, sitting completely quietly and obediently, each one of them watching on without any sign of emotion. If only that could be said for those subjects behind them.

"You have been called upon to serve..." she began without stutter.

\_"you will be trained... and you will become the best we can make of yo\_u"

"You shall be trained, becoming the very best we can make of you," she told them all, straightening up a few subjects with interest. Others were bowing their heads though, a few tears shed amongst the Biotic's. The Turians, young with rather more jaggeder, less uniform spikes along their heads than their adult equivalents, sat completely silently as well, listening. The Sangheili were also silent, though many appeared to be in some form of shock than recognition. Halsey couldn't read the emotions of those they called Quarrians, their faces hidden behind various masks, though from the sad looks of their shining eyes and from the sound of it, they may all just be crying or sniffing.

\_"You will be the protectors of Earth and all her colonies..."\_

Halsey slightly bowed her head back to the papers in front of her, before resuming.

"You shall become the guardians of our peoples, and all their worlds," that was the line that always guaranteed to carry much weight with candidates, as many more's attention were captured.

>"The road to this will be long, as will it be hard," Halsey told them. "Each and everyone of you shall be called upon to make sacrifices, however small or however large. From this point forward, you shall train, learn, and become stronger, to become the Spartans that is required of each and everyone of you."<p>

She couldn't judge their reaction to all of that, but she left it there. With a nod, she motioned for the guards to clear the amphitheater. Indeed, it would be a hard road, and likewise with the II Program, some might not just survive.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterward:<strong>

\*\*Published now, only half an hour after the last chapter, because I knew that the second part of the Prologue couldn't stand on its own without part III.

><strong>

**\*\*This is the end of the Prologue Arc. Yes, that thing with Shepard walking away was quite ominous. Act I will begin from here, as will the larger extent of the story.**

**Yes, the Leviathan's also are believers in the Mantle. I came up with the idea, and it didn't seem that far from them. Their true motives for starting the conflict? That's definitely a larger mystery.**

#### 4. I - Snake Eyes

**\_Act I: Insurrection\_**

\* \* \*

**<p><strong><em>Chapter I: Snake Eyes<em>**

\* \* \*

**<p><strong><em>"Do not fear the weapon but the person who wields it"  
- Javik<em>**

\* \* \*

**<p><em>Letter to Project Supervisor,<em>**

**\_Scan and Archive Date: 7th June, 2569\_**

**<em>Document<em> \_Archivist\_: \_MIL AI 8275 [Alias: Ananke]\_**

**<em>Local Classification: Encrypted<em>**

**\_Dear Catherine\_**

**\_I received word from Ananke that only yesterday night did you initiate the program. I viewed the event, and I must say that I am most pleased with the successful initiation of all two hundred and fifty subjects into the program. I know you'll have your hands full in for the next few weeks handling the quite difficult integration of the subjects, but that's why the Office created Ananke for the program. Combined with the rest of the V Network, I doubt there's anything she isn't capable of.\_**

**\_In another matter, I have decided to approve your request to have all records surrounding the Spartan II Program returned to you, and have returned your access to the ONI general database. I'd keep it out of sight, if I was you, Catherine.**

**>While Margaret didn't ever say anything about this, we both know that she'd probably do more than just frown upon it. While the rumors are true, that the Admiral has indeed fallen ill and probably isn't even monitoring anything as of now, fear keeps the ranks in line. If anyone has any assumptions that we did this under the radar, a reckoning could be far worse than the usual.<em>**

**\_While I do respect your dedication to the program and to pass on some of the expertise employed in its predecessors, be aware that doing so has risks. On the new system since your imprisonment, all documents surrounding the Spartan II Program have been moved up to**

Psi Level Classification. Even I haven't laid eyes on them, so I hope you know what you're doing.\_

\_Sincerely, Vice Admiral Ned Rich\_

\_\*0700 Hrs post archiving, AI MIL 8256 attempted to access and forward document to unknown location.\*  
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><p>As shrapnel cluttered the air, he breathed hard, raising his M7 Silenced Sub-Machine Gun and fired out accurate bursts through the carnage.<p>

Screams responded, soldiers in grey uniforms dropping amidst the whirling of dusty smoke and crossfire. Isaiah; G214, could see through it all, his VISR Mode sweeping through the entirety of the ruined bunker.

\_"Check fire! Watch out for priority targets!"\_

He straightened up his aim, his SPI Armor replacing his own vision of the world with a tiny microscopic camera on the top of his weapon that served as a scope. He saw from the gun's prospective as it burped out bullets in timed intervals, each tearing into the flesh of a plain uniformed Insurrectionist Soldiers.

On his flank, his fellow Spartan III's began to push forward, though none were as furious as those to the right of his squad, the infamous Team Saber.

\_"G009! You're pushing them leftward and out of the bunker! Hold your ground!"\_ the commanding officer of the operation yelled to them over their Comm yet again. On his Heads Up Display, Isaiah could see his teammates blink their status lights orange twice. Despite being knee deep in innies and under heavy fire, even he felt the overwhelming urge to roll his eyes at that. Team Scimitar didn't hold much regards for those specific comrades.

While Scimitar stood at range, Isaiah own team bringing down the demoralized and heavily outgunned Insurrectionist troopers, Saber's three man team was in far to close and were spooking the innies into retreat. Fire Team Chakram was forced to follow up behind Saber, giving them reluctant fire support.

\_"Target has left the bunker! The objective is on the run. Teams Scimitar, Saber, target objective immediately now! Abandon your current engagement and focus on taking down the target."\_

It wasn't like they weren't doing that already. Saber had forced the objective out of the bunker and probably into a vehicle. Those status lights blinked orange twice again. His heads up display returned to his helmet, and he saw outlined through the smoke, three bodyguards pushing their charge out a hidden secondary exit from the underground bunker to somewhere up in the top side base. They'd ruined their

chance to pin them against the wall and now they had to catch their prey.

"Get on them now, Scimitar!" he shouted into his Comm, reloading his M7 as he kicked back a wounded Insurrectionist in his path. Saber was already moving far faster than them, the team already out of the breached bunker, clambering back out of the shattered concrete which their explosives had blown upon earlier. Isaiah had other ideas, following the target directly down his secret passageway.

The bodyguards tried to seal the hidden walls behind them, but the full weight of a Spartan III in SPI Mark IV Armor simply barged them right down as he didn't give up his chase. His team of four formed up behind him, Scimitar moving fast.

As they came charging out of the vehicle bay, his team mate G182; Christen, activated a hard light shield to protect them all from the damage of an incoming grenade launched at them. The fragmentation grenade exploded on the protective barrier, but it was giving the elite Insurrectionist Spec-Ops the time they needed to place the target aboard an armored personnel carrier. The modified and heavily armored M12 Troop Transport rolled out of the vehicle bay and onto the dusty roads. Anything they could get rolling followed, a rag-tag convoy of ATV's and Warthogs carrying a wide range of armaments, including one with a modified chassis to incorporate a Covie Fuel Rod AA canon in place of its main gun.

"Command, do you read me? Targets have left the base! They're mobile in vehicles, over!" Isaiah shouted into his comm.

"Roger, Scimitar. Air support is on its way," \_he received in reply. No. Air Support would not help one bit, especially with all those Warthogs.

"That's a negative, Command! Too many AA's are surrounding the target! Hold off air support!" He advised as Scimitar neutralized the last few Insurrectionists left behind in the vehicle bay. He spotted two remaining Warthogs still sitting in the vehicle bay.  
>"We'll mount up! Pursue the target!"<p>

"Okay, roger that, Scimitar. Take them down. Losing the target is not an option."\_

"Roger, that," he nodded. "This is Scimitar out."

"Orders are to pursue?" G329; David questioned as he climbed behind the wheel of the first Warthog in line as Isaiah clambered onto the gun. Jenifer mounted up in the passenger seat, holding a DMR.

"Positive," Isaiah nodded, and the Warthog was already in full throttle, driving out of the vehicle bay onto the dusty makeshift roads that surrounded the Insurrectionist compound. As he glanced back, he saw that the vehicle bay has also be covered previously be a fake wall that served as a door, exactly why their recon hadn't spotted it earlier. He could still hear a dying firefight from inside the compound, the three others teams on the mission probably finishing off the last of the stragglers.

They were speeding down one the main roadways the insurgents had

paved, dust billowing out behind all their vehicles. The size of the convoy around the target made it impossible to miss. That size would also be a major impairment to their speed, as they had to keep formation and protect the priority.

"We're gaining on them! Be prepared to open up on those escorts!" Isaiah shouted into the Comm, and he began to squeeze the trigger, warming up the M41 LAAG on his Warthog. The second Warthog was on their right flank, Christen gunning with G053; Merrick, driving.

The Insurrectionists swiveled their guns around as they saw the two Warthogs manned by Spartans approach. A rocket was launched from one of the Warthogs in their convoy, and both drivers in Scimitar Team easily swerved to avoid it. Isaiah unleashed the mounted gun, opening fire on the nearest opposing jeep.

An elite trooper's shields flared before he screamed as his shield generator overloaded, the gunner tumbling off his warthog as bullets cut through his flesh. The driver got hit next, the Warthog tumbling over onto its side, leaving the passenger to be thrown out onto the open road.

"All teams be advised. Insurrectionist Air Support is inbound," their commander informed them, her voice sounding grim, a very bad sign. The veteran Spartan II rarely was intimidated by any odds, though this mission was certainly not going to plan.

"Watch out for any fliers!" Isaiah advised, finding his next target and opening fire on the next vehicle, a heavily armored warthog that shielded those manning it from oncoming fire. However, the make shift armor plating would probably be no match for the LAAG's 7x99 armor penetrating rounds. Combining fire with his teammate on the second Warthog, they quickly dispatched of it.

The convoy began to shift their focus on them, with the ATV's and additional hogs pulling back to deal with them. That Fuel Rod Warthog seemed to have disappeared from the pack, and Isaiah was wary of its return.

Isaiah kept their guns focused on the bigger targets of the armored warthogs. Jenifer easily dealt with the ATV's by firing off bursts of DMR fire to take out their drivers. Unlike the average Insurrectionist trooper, they had shielding as well as automatic target assistance to make Scimitar's already formidable accuracy capable of not even missing a shot.

David kept having to throw the Warthog from side to side of the road, as the Insurrectionists tried to slow them down simply by filling the air with oncoming fire and rockets. Isaiah kept on his own targets, taking down Warthog after Warthog of unshielded crew.

"We're near the target!" Merrick shouted into their Comm. They only had three Warthogs between themselves and the APC now. The target was finally within reach.

"Don't lose him now!" Isaiah told them. "Ignore the remaining hogs. Hit the objective now. Target the wheels."

"Roger, boss," Christan responded, firing his own mounted gun low at the APC's wheels. The tires were reinforced, but they still easily

were shredded upon the LAAG's armor piercing fire. The APC swerved, but as testament to the driver's skill, the vehicle kept on the road instead of crashing into those deep storm-water ditches that lined both sides of the roadway.

"Hey! Watch out! Those fliers are inbound!" Jenifer warned, pointing upward to the sky. Three AV-14's; Hornets, were almost overhead. Isaiah immediately turned his gun upwards on the Hornets, opening fire on the light aircraft. The bullets only chipped the vehicle's light armor, and Isaiah spotted shielding flash to protect those standing on the landing skids.

The Hornets didn't initiate any attack just yet, positioning themselves above the Warthog that Merrick and Christan manned.

"Shake it now," Isaiah commanded, "whatever it's planning, it ain't good!"

"I know," Merrick replied, the Warthog beginning to swerve side to side to try and escape the Hornet's shadow. The two wing mates flanking the hornet in center, broke off and began targeting them. The twin linked rotary canons opened fire on their own Warthog and Isaiah's own shielding flared. Those canons pushed his shielding down to only a tenth in a few seconds.

Before it could smash through and pierce his armor however, the two Hornets exploded in a splash of green. The Fuel Rod Warthog from before had returned, with definitely a change of sides.

The Hornet flying center waited no longer. Isaiah saw something, more someone, leap off the landing skids. Before his mind could think of how suicidal that trooper was, or maybe that he had been shot off, he saw the armor that the attacker was wearing and what he was about to do...

He knew by time he shouted it into his Comm, it would already be too late. Christen looked up to see it too. He raised his arm and activated his Hard Light Shield, a barrier over their Warthog; though Isiah knew it wouldn't be enough. Unlike a Hard Light Shield System which could only take so much pounding before overloading the system, Armor Lock was a more powerful force.

The Warthog exploded into a rain of fiery debris. Isaiah couldn't take his stare away from it. His HUD still highlighted his team mates as they were flung from the wreckage, Christen being thrown onto the road but Merrick not so lucky. Now the wounded gunner landed far back from where the wreckage came to lay, sprawling over the dusty road.

He stared into the burning remains of the vehicle, his eyes wide with shock. In just that: Seconds. That was all it took for him to lose his team mate, a fellow member of Scimitar, one that he had trained alongside since the age of six. In seconds, he might just lose another.

His VISR colored the outline of their attacker emerging from the burning jeep. It was a damned snake...

"The objective is ahead!" Jen announced, reminding him to look back

forward. "Looks like Saber's taking it down."

That was certainly true. The Warthog that Saber commandeered now smashed itself into the side of the target APC. With its wheels already busted, the M12 APC's driver could do nothing to save it. The vehicle flipped onto its side, stopping it in its tracks.

"Saber has got the objective. Boss, should we turn back and assist Chris?" David questioned, keen to not leave a squad mate to die. Isaiah watched as he saw the three members of Saber Team climb out of their own Warthog and surround the downed APC. Yea, they had the objective secured alright, but it was Scimitar's immediate objective too.

>Then there was Chris... probably still lying downed on the road behind them, bleeding out or being finished off...<p>

"You two head back and assist 182. I'll assist Saber," Isaiah told them, and the Warthog skidded to a stop. He leaped off the gun and onto the road, quickly sprinting to close in on the objective. David was already turning the Warthog around to go back.

Saber had surrounded the Warthog, their leader G099; Ash, ordering his two team members Oliva and Mark to open the APC's back hatch. The three Spartans seemed to be going in pretty quick for a very delicate situation. They needed the target inside alive.

By time Isaiah was standing by them, Mark had already stepped forward to grab the door and pull it open. As he tore the hatch off, it detonated outward, obviously rigged from the beginning. As their team mate fell, both remaining two members of Saber responded violently. They both fired off their weapons into the passenger compartment of the APC without any qualms.

"What the hell are you doing!?" By time Isaiah shouted that, it was too late to stop anything. While Oliva had been firing accurate DMR bursts, Ash had simply sprayed with his MA5B, butchering all those inside... including their target.

"Responding to the threat," Ash simply growled in response as he stepped inside the compartment and seized the rim of the officer's uniform around his neck, dragging the man out. Isaiah could hear him groan, signs that their objective wasn't dead yet. Oliva didn't even assist; too busy aiding the downed Mark, who looked like he had some shrapnel pierce his armor.

Ash dragged the URF Officer out without pause, simply tossing him to the ground. Isaiah could see two bullet wounds in the man's right arm, bleeding heavily. Hell, he could probably bleed out.

Isaiah knelled down beside him, putting all other thoughts aside as he ejected the can of Bio-Foam from his own armor's supplies and jammed the nozzle into the wounds. Their target cursed as he injected the freezing foam into him, the foam now already drying quick and stopping the bleeding; their main concern. They'd have to get the target patched up fast if they were going to get anything out of him.

"Target is secured," Isaiah reported into their Comm Channel. "But has two bullet wounds. He'll need attention immediately."



\_"There are two, bullet wounds? I expected better, Scimitar. We are in route to you now..."\_

Isaiah grunted, standing back up to his feet and glaring over at Ash. Yes, the fault for Saber's blood thirty methods was now pinned on him. Ash didn't even look back. As the two wounded drivers tried to crawl away unnoticed from the wreckage, Ash casually strolled over and put each one of them down with a burst of rifle fire.

\_"Hey Boss! We got Chris, but that guy is right on our tail! Lead him away or come back?"\_ Jen called into the Comm.

"Don't take him on alone. Head back our way. Reinforcements are inbound," Isaiah advised.

\_"Roger. Heading back now..."\_

Isaiah looked back up at Ash, who was standing in front of him now.

"Something we should know?" his fellow Spartan III questioned, his tone always giving away his hostility.

"The rest of my squad is heading back here, and they'll be bringing company," Isaiah told him. Ash snorted.

"That figures. It's definitely like Scimitar to run away from a fight," Saber Team's leader sneered. Thank god nobody could see past his visor, because that really did make him clench his teeth as well almost clench his fists and hit the disrespectful piece of shit in the face, but he knew never to show that. He kept his calm.  
>He glanced back, hearing the Warthog's engine rumbling in the distance, but figuring it wasn't close enough yet.<p>

"How about you show some respect? I just lost a Spartan back there!" Isaiah called back just as Ash almost turned away.

"Well, people die. Get used to it," he responded. How usual of him, still acting like they were trainees on Onyx. Even then, he wasn't this much of a hot headed fool. Saber Team's leader turned away, simply marching off. Oliva watched him go, before turning back.

"Hey, whoever it was, Isaac... I'm sorry," Oliva commented.

"Thanks..." Isaiah nodded, turning back around as the Warthog came into sight now, tearing around the corner towards where the last battered remnants of the convoy lay. He could see Jen using the LAAG Canon on their pursuers... or rather: single pursuer, riding a salvaged ATV.

"A snake, huh?" Mark commented, making use of the Spartan III's nickname for rogue members. Of course, these rogue Spartans were of the IV Program, and thankfully by now, ONI had abandoned all presumptions that the Spartan III's could be deployed alongside the IV's and expected to work efficiently together.  
>"Makes sense for one of the traitors to be here."<p>

"Well, he is sure to be outgunned," Ash murmured as he hopped back

out of the APC wreckage, carrying a few weapons under his arm. He simply flung them to the ground in front of them. It was quite a nice assembly. The two weapons were a M45 Tactical Shotgun and a M739 Light Machine Gun. The Shotgun and SAW were some of the newer models, postwar unlike most of the URF's equipment. It made sense too that their supposed top troopers would get anything near modern.

>"I shouldn't even need to say it. Focus fire on em."<p>

Isaiah readied his own weapon, activating his scope as the rogue Spartan came into range around the wreckage's. So far, that guy had actually done decently well at avoiding the heavier, slower LAAG canon on the back of the Warthog, but he couldn't dodge bullets. Isaiah opened fired with his M7 SMG.

The Spartan's FOTUS variant MJOLNIR Armor went ablaze as its shielding popped into place. The Spartan IV bailed from the ATV, rolling into cover behind one of the crashed insurgent manned Warthogs. Just his presence was enough to rally some surviving URF troopers who were laying low in the wrecks to crawl out and join the fight.

The rest of Scimitar finally reached them, David slamming down on the brakes to stop them nearby. Isaiah could see Christen lying in the passenger seat, his armor damaged, but he was alive. Jen swiveled around the LAAG canon, firing it on the nearby URF troops.

"He's good for now, but he'll need a medic," David reported, drawing out his own MA5K Carbine. They could hear shouting from down the roadway, the URF troops rallying and pressing forward, but their Spartan stayed back. "Boss... that snake is tough. Using a discontinued armor aug."

Isaiah remembered the Spartan IV Armor Locking. The ability to so in MJOLNIR armor was supposedly discontinued, with it damaging the armor's systems and gel layer over time. ONI removed the tech, citing how much it was costing them to repair or replace gear damaged due to Armor Locking.

>Though, it wasn't like the URF cared about that though, nor their rogue.<p>

"Oliva, grab him and get him out of the way," Ash instructed, waving for her to drag away their target. Oliva grabbed their prisoner and dragged him behind the wrecked APC. If the Rebel troopers couldn't rescue him, they might just as well shoot him.

The six Spartan III's stood their ground, taking cover and otherwise engaging in a not that drastic firefight with incoming rebel troopers. Their shielding units protected them from most of their fire, and the limited units that the URF's Spec-Ops troopers appeared to be equipped with seemed only to have the shielding strength of a quarter of their own.

\_"Be advised, Scimitar, we've been engaged by additional URF Air Forces. Possible ETA is eight minutes. Hang in there, additional squads is being sent your way," \_they were advised. Guess they had to hold their ground for a while longer.

Though, now that Spartan IV was on the move. Leaping out from behind cover, the rogue Spartan charged towards them. They all immediately turned their fire on him as he charged through open ground. As soon

as the bullets struck, Isaiah saw him waver... and disappear. Dammit. All that time that guy spent supposedly hiding under the wrecks, he was swapping his Armor Modules for a holographic decoy.

"Stay sharp! He's still out there!" Isaiah shouted out, scanning for any signs of their opponent. They abandoned the Warthog as troopers began pitch fragmentation grenades at them, the grenadiers trying to force them to fall back into the open from their cover behind the wrecked vehicles.

His shields flared as he was caught in the blast of one of the grenades. He raised his rifle back up and shot the thrower, a URF Grenadier that got far too close.

Their Spartan reappeared, the IV now charging across open ground amongst the URF infantry. Jen fired off a round of DMR bursts, eliminating another hologram. A few seconds later, another one appeared, still moving across open ground.

"We can't keep wasting ammo on holograms!" David shouted, firing off his Carbine to take the decoy down. Another leaped over the wreck, charging across open ground. No way could that rogue IV have recharged his gear that quick.

"There he is! Take him down!" Isaiah shouted and pointed at the Spartan in red FOTUS armor charging towards them. This time the bullets hit something real, the Spartan's shields flaring as Oliva opened fire with the Light Machine Gun, the SAW chewing through the shields.

The rogue Spartan rolled into cover behind one of the crashed Hornets, recharging his shields no doubt. Isaiah primed his own grenade and chucked it towards the Hornet, the downed flier exploding. The rogue was still standing, but that explosion probably took his shields down. Mark fired his Battle Rifle, landing bursts through the flaming wreckage on the Spartan IV.

His bullets sliced through another hologram. He was cowering somewhere else.

A majority of the URF troopers had fallen by now, or decided now was a good time to fall back and live to fight another day. The rebels always never had to stomach to stand their ground. That Spartan kept coming however. It was because he was now right on top of them.

Dropping down from the top of downed APC, the Spartan IV landed right in the midst of the two squads. Before even their heightened reaction times could bring about their response, the rogue activated some device that spewed electricity over all of them, overloading and frying their shielding units. With all of them stunned, the IV combat rolled clear, raising his own Assault Rifle; a weapon that Isaiah himself couldn't recognize. And it spat fire.

Jen fell first. Her SPI Armor was ignited by the hailstorm of incendiary that rogue Spartan unleashed on them all. The rest didn't get hit that bad before the rogue Spartan's weapon actually overheated; refusing to fire, though David was staggering back, his own armor on fire covered in a strange flaming substance, almost sand like.

They all turned their fire on the Spartan IV. Isaiah raised his SMG and unleashed the whole clip into him. The rogue Spartan's shields collapsed under the heavy fire, before the bullets breached his armor. Bleeding heavily, their attacker collapsed to the ground. Ash advanced towards him and fired his Shotgun into the fallen corpse, just to make sure.

Isaiah instantly turned back around to his fallen squad members. David had managed to brush off the flaming substance, thankfully not anything sticky, though from the grains of flaming particles the size of sand, it certainly wasn't anything they'd seen before. His armor was burnt in some places, but he was alive.

Jen however... he knelled by her side.

"Jen? Jen?" Isaiah questioned. After seconds of no response, he unsealed her helmet and pulled it off. Eyes were open, but not moving...

"Some of those rounds must have pierced the armor, and then got inside... nasty stuff," David spoke at a whisper, glaring down at their fallen comrade. A single mission and that was all it took to reduce Scimitar; a team of five that had stood together for twenty two years now, to only three.

Saber Team simply stood by, standing on watch. Ash stood by the rogue Spartan's corpse, studying his equipment. He pulled that weapon the IV had been using, and looked at it. Even from where he was standing, Isaiah could see it was something built for Human use but certainly wasn't UNSC equipment, far too sleek.

As Mark stood back up and looked back to the APC, an explosion suddenly went off behind it.

"Aw... crap! He's dead!"

That hardly needed confirming. A Fragmentation grenade detonated, and it had most certainly claimed the life of their objective. Mark looked down at the blasted remains and scowled.

"Did he drop it?" Oliva questioned, motioning back to the fallen rogue Spartan.

"Nah handed it to him, just in case. Guess he had the guts to use it..." Mark reported, sighing. "The objective is lost."

"Maybe if someone kept an eye on him..." Ash growled, shaking his head. Nobody bothered to respond. Isaiah simply called it in.

"Commander, the target is dead. Repeat... target is KIA," he announced.

\_"KIA Scimitar One? What happened?"\_

"During the attack, he managed to get his hands on a Frag grenade... pulled the pin and blew himself up when he knew he wasn't going to escape," Isiah explained, before adding: "My team lost two Spartan's, ma'am, to a rogue four. We've got another injured."

The commander simply sighed, a rare emotion.

"We're coming to you now. Gather the dead and prepare for extraction," the commander told them, before the Comm communication ended.

They stood on that roadway for four more minutes in absolute silence, with no further enemy forces, or even other Gamma Company squad for that matter, appeared. They eventually went back to the wreckage and retrieved Merrick's body, placing it with Jen's. They were just another squad with casualties. Maybe the commander would force Saber and Scimitar into a single team just to return them to full strength, and also as punishment for their failures.

UNSC Falcons now flew overhead, circling around the fallen URF Compound before coming back their way. Isaiah could spot the leading Falcon now descending towards their location.

It touched down not far from the wrecked APC. Another stayed on over watch overhead, though it wasn't likely at all that any URF forces hadn't retreated by now.

The second it landed, the Commander stepped off, surveying the remains of the battle as well as the two squads present. They all saluted.

"At ease, all of you..." Spartan II, 087, commanded. They all dropped their arms. "Just who exactly did we lose?"

"G053 and G199. G182 is wounded," Isaiah reported grimly.

"Remembering the dead can wait," a voice behind the Commander told them. Isaiah remembered him from the briefing. An ONI Agent: Ben Harrison.

"Are you sure that Admiral Barris is dead?" The ONI agent questioned, almost outraged by the entire course of events.<p>

"Yes, sir," Isaiah was once again forced to admit, his fellow squad leader certainly not speaking up. "The target committed suicide with an explosive device to evade capture."

"Dammit! Do you know how important that man is, soldier?" the ONI agent questioned, stepping forward beyond the Commander. "That man was the last of the ruling three! You've undermined this entire operation with your failure!"

"If you have issues with those under my command, sir, you should voice them to me," the Commander stated, stepping past the ONI agent and back into his field of view, "as is protocol."

"Indeed I shall." The ONI agent simply sneered, turning back around to the Falcon. The Commander turned back and looked at them, glaring with disapproval. For a moment, Isaiah wished she'd been wearing her helmet and not having to bear putting up with the shame now placed upon them.

He glanced in the direction of Team Saber, noticing that their team leader hadn't even shifted.

\_Yea, act like you don't even care.\_ \_You're already the shame of the entire Company.\_

"All of you," the Commander simply told them. "Load up onto the Falcons now, and grab the traitor's corpse, as well. We're lifting out of here."

\* \* \*

><p>Kelly was thankful that Agent Harrison had chosen to voice his disgust in their failure by remaining silent for the entire trip back to their base of operations; the Navy ship UNSC <em>Head of Thorns</em>. <em>She had enough to deal with already with having another failed operation of her hands.

For the second time this year alone; it was only July, Saber Team had jumped the gun. On Tarsis IX, it was simply breaking from formation that didn't have that in much of consequences, but this was too far and it had cost them one of the most important operation's they had ever been tasked with, bringing down the last surviving member of the URF's top three, their political leader assassinated before the Covenant War even began, their General; Greeves, personally killed by a Blue Team op on Victoria and now their Admiral was dead, even though ONI badly wanted him alive.

ONI would have a fit over this, but it wasn't like they could actually do anything to punish them, short of sending them on a suicide mission. If there any example of Spartans having their moral zapped, it was Gamma Company. Since the Covenant War, they'd bounced between operations involving battering the rebel worlds that had cut ties with the UNSC following the war, back into submission.

>It was understandable. They had been recruited initially in their desire to kill covies, something they never actually got to do. Since the Spartan III's never even got any training in counter-insurgency as the Spartan II's originally were, they were practically useless in a majority of deployments, only used by ONI in the most severe situations where there was open conflict between UNSC security forces and rebels.<p>

It was an entire decade ago now, that Captain Osman had approached her with offer of promotion to Lieutenant Commander and a placement as commanding officer of Gamma Company. Moving the old timers to senior positions, as Frederic put it, though not counting time spent in Cyro sleep, she was probably only in her early forties now. Unlike the remaining Spartan II's, the III's were still functioning as they did before.

>Since the war, Gamma Company had simply then operated under whatever commander was charge of the operation they were assigned to, though ONI knew that in order to operate away from command, Gamma Company needed an experienced CO that both could command their respect and "understood Gamma Company's unique nature".<br>At the time, she hadn't had any doubts about accepting the position. Knowing the Spartan III's from the battle for Onyx, especially Team Saber, she knew that the Spartans that Kurt and Mendez trained were definitely worthy of the Spartan designation.

\_Damn... I wish you were here now, Kurt. You'd know how to get this Company back on track.\_

Kurt had been one of the more sociable Spartan II's, as far as that went, and had been the perfect choice for ONI when the head of the Spartan III Program had selected a Spartan II to train the next generation. Kurt knew Gamma Company better than anyone, and he knew how to lead. If only he had survived the war...

Now, she had spent a decade commanding an entire company that had certainly changed since the Covenant War. Past their sense of duty, they felt no motivation to combat the Insurrection, and most of their 'augmentations' had turned mostly a majority of the company's members blood thirsty, despite the medication used to ward off those specific side effects.

>Again, she had expected Gamma to be exactly what Kurt described on Onyx as the 'finest company of Spartans he'd ever trained', but now they were far from it. Now monumentally overshadowed by ONI's new Spartan IV Program, all that the Spartan III's were now were ONI's box of expendable lunatic soldiers with a civilian causality rate that Kelly would have thought only an entire brigade's worth of artillery out of their minds could achieve.<p>

After a year, she'd basically left any attempts to change that behind. There really wasn't much anybody could do, only complying with ONI's orders, slapping a rifle in their hands and telling them to complete the objective. There were still a few good teams, like Scimitar; who managed to contain any excessive aggression from the side effects of their augmentations, which knew how to get the job done. Though, unfortunately, they were a minority now.

>They weren't the kids were an eagerness to please their predecessors she saw on Onyx anymore. Anything short of going back into battle against the now non-existent Covenant would get Gamma Company motivated again, however briefly. She had to admit she had lost respect for a majority of Gamma's squads over the course of their campaigns to combat the Insurrection.<p>

Their Falcons lifted into the skies now, making rendezvous with the in-atmosphere Frigate Crown of Thorns. The silence continued as the Falcons flew up into the Frigate's hangers. Slowly, the hum of the Falcon's engines decreased as the rotors ceased motion as the Falcon lay to rest.

Stepping up from his heat at the opposite end of the Falcon, Agent Harrison gave her one final comment.

"Beta Five will hear of this failure, Lieutenant Commander," Harrison warned, "combined with the numerous less than positive reports of your command, I'd say that your remaining time as Commander of Gamma Company, as well as maybe even this entire division itself, has its days numbered."

Without further words, the ONI Agent was marching off. Kelly arched an eyebrow at that. Even in the state they were in now, even the Spartan III's weren't an asset than ONI could just cast away.

\_Maybe better you put your operations in the hands of your glorified Hell-jumpers next time, spook.\_

Finally standing up from the Falcon, she stepped down into the hanger, the five squads that had participated in the operation waiting to be dismissed. Overall now, they were two good Spartans less. Now that the adrenaline and the mission itself was over,

Scimitar's remaining standing two members looked beyond grim.

>Kelly surveyed the row of Spartans, seeing similar body language mirrored throughout all of them.<p>

"Squads, you are dismissed until further debriefing in 0600 hrs," she notified them and they cleared away. The impact of failing a mission of such scale would probably diminish Gamma's already decimated morale. She watched all of them depart the hanger, one by one. Her gaze stopped on Team Saber.

\_I gave you one more chance today, and you screwed it up. If Kurt was here, he'd be ashamed of you.\_

Bitterness was hardly an overstatement when it came to her judgements about Saber. Once, Saber had been amongst the top three teams amongst the entire Company back on Onyx, and had fought well alongside Blue Team during the battle for Onyx. Kurt had once told them that Ash was one of the company's smartest and best leaders. So now? A lot had changed.

\_No, honestly, I've always wanted to know what my former teammates think about my Spartans. Speak your mind, Kelly," Kurt told her. Kelly shifted her eyes back to the two Spartan III's far behind him, knelling beside an unconscious Halsey. They didn't have their helmets on, and Kelly could see that one was male and other female. They worked with each other as they attended to the Doctor's not so serious injuries from their landing on Onyx earlier.\_

\_That's other than jumpy?" Kelly questioned.\_

\_Yea, other than that," Kurt smiled, though slightly unnerved by that commented for a second, "Everyone's just a bit nervous right now, that's all."\_

\_Some are close knit... maybe a bit too close knit," she commented. Kurt raised an eyebrow at that.\_

\_Like you and John?"\_

\_No... That was different."\_

\_Was it?" Kurt questioned, raising a slight smile.\_

\_That's not the point."\_

\_Maybe it is," Kurt summarized. "I honestly don't see a problem, do you?"\_

\_It just makes it harder when they fall. Losing another at such an age..."\_

\_We lost half our number during the Augmentations way before then," Kurt noted, "we carried on, because that's what we do."\_

\_But they're not us, Kurt," Kelly noted.\_

\_No..." Kurt seemed caught up in thought on that. "Maybe they're not..."\_



Kelly sighed, knowing that more names would have to be removed from the roster quite soon.

As he pressed ahead and passed by a leaving Ash, Isaiah grabbed something out of his hands. Ash glared up at him, slightly enraged; maybe his augmentations setting off his enhanced aggression yet again. He cooled it though, walking onward.

"Ma'am," Isaiah addressed her, bringing forth the item, "we recovered this from that fallen rouge IV soldier. It's salvaged unknown tech."

She was generally surprised at that. They hadn't ever declared, or even needed, to salvage alien tech since the Covenant War, now that ONI had almost every bit of Covenant and even Forerunner tech at their fingertips. This was an unknown weapon? Insurrectionists had black market and modified stuff, but never their own unique weapon set.

"Unknown?" She reached forward and took the rifle out of Isaiah's hands. It was cleaner and smoother than a UNSC rifle, though lacking a scope. It had a single grip for the trigger, but surprisingly the clip was loaded behind that... and the clip glowed.

"It was loaded with some kind of incendiary ammo I've never seen before, like each shot fired was made of burning sand," Isaiah explained. "Those shots still had enough strength to punch through Jen's armor though..."

"That's certainly interesting..." Kelly studied the weapon, noting the lack of a scope, though she doubted the Assault Rifle needed one. As irresponsible and against protocol as it was, she felt a slight urge to fire the weapon out of the Crown of Thorn's hanger bay, just to witness how it worked. If what he was saying was true, then this weapon was probably prototype tech; exclusive to the Spartan IV Program seeing how one of their many traitors got a hold of it.

">Could be prototype ONI tech," she told him, "though even if it isn't, I'll show this to Agent Harrison anyway. Good work, squad leader," she nodded, taking the weapon. Hopefully it was ONI's stolen prototype, or the Insurrectionists had somehow excelled them in weapons science while the UNSC's backs were turned.<p>

\* \* \*

><p>"The salvage of this weapon, Lieutenant Commander, could have changed everything as we know it," Agent Harrison placed the alien Assault Rifle back into the protective case he supplied, slamming it closed. This reaction was far better than when he first learned of it. Kelly had never known ONI spooks to go out of their minds like that.<br>"Thankfully however, our AI's have identified it as one stolen from us. The situation may just be under control."

That was great and all, but she had no idea of what the Agent was talking about.

"That's good to hear, sir," she nodded.

"Indeed, 087," Harrison replied, preferring the numerical designation. "With this, we may have just gained something very small

out of this catastrophe. While your here... I do believe there is something else you should know."

"Like what, sir?"

"I have received word from Vice Admiral Rich, which CINCONI has approved of the dismantlement and termination of the remaining Spartan III operators," Agent Harrison announced. He had warned her of it a day ago, but... it felt like an empty threat. ONI seriously couldn't be considering scrapping the last few real Spartans they had?

"That also means that from henceforward, your position as head of Gamma Company is revoked and you shall be reassigned, commander," Harrison continued on.<p>

"Sir... what does ONI plan to do with the remaining Spartan III's?" Kelly questioned. It wasn't like they could just tell them to leave.

"We have long debated that, considered it... and have come to the conclusion that the only option left to us is terminate the company fully. You must understand," Harrison told her, "we tried to adapt them into the Spartan IV Program, but that failed. We tried to make the remains of this program efficient and worth the effort invested into it. We even recruited you, but alike to all measures before, you failed to salvage this endeavor. With a new program initiated; training real Spartans mind you, we can't spare the finances anymore to fund their significant upkeep and with those illegal Augmentations... I'm afraid ONI simply can't let them go."

She didn't respond, too shocked processing that information. It was... terrifying.

"We'll keep the Headhunters, and the best units we separated from the main unit, but the main mess that is Gamma Company must unfortunately be cleared aside," Harrison nodded, "CINCONI has approved it, and there is furthermore nothing we can do."

"Sir... this is a mistake," Kelly finally responded, "For over a decade, we've been fighting to keep the UNSC intact."

"What Gamma Company has been doing over the last decade, is spreading only terror and fear among the dissident colonies," Harrison shook his head. "I've personally reviewed each and every report. When your company gets out of control, innocent civilians die. Not just possible threats, but anybody in their path. You must understand that today, not one person down on those colonies would think Spartans are heroes anymore, Commander. The Spartan III's were meant for one thing, and that is to wage war on the Covenant. Now, there is no Covenant and no reason for them to be."

"I..." she couldn't bear to say it, but it was necessary, "understand what you're saying, sir."

"That's good, because this information is confidential. I advise you begin preparing to leave your post, Commander," Harrison told her. For a moment, she felt like that would be the moment to leave, to escape this. But now was not the time for any cowardice.

"Sir, I do believe that this decision may have been made hastily,"

she protested, "surely, there must be some mission to which Gamma Company will be of use to you."

"Maybe so, now..." Harrison shrugged, "but honestly, as yesterday's operation has shown, ONI can't trust them to carry out any mission anymore."

"You know how close we were, sir," she pointed out, "the fact that Barris killed himself rather than be captured was hardly the fault of our teams on the ground. Despite all they faced, they secured the objective. We should have one more chance, even if it's a suicide mission. I know every Spartan in the company would rather die on the field of battle rather than... be made redundant."

"If you did get your final mission, Commander, would you make sure it is successfully completed?" Harrison questioned.

"Even if I have to suit up and finish it myself, sir, I swear it would be done," Kelly nodded.

"Then, I may contact Beta Five; request that you undertake one more operation under my command..." Harrison agreed, lifting her hopes slightly. He glanced back to the holding case. "The emergence of this weapon in URF hands has given us one piece of critical Intel: we know where the agent who stole it went. Perhaps this will be a one more mission suitable for Gamma Company... one that needs no survivors."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterward:<strong>

\*\*Okay, that Chapter was written exclusively from the prospective of the Haloverse, but it was necessary to open an entirely new plot thread. I have kind of adopted the method of writing common amongst the Halo novels, which simply does one prospective per chapter with only a few exceptions.\*\*

\*\*For next chapter, I'm going to do something completely from the Mass Effect's universe point of view. I know this is a cross over and people want to see crosses... but I really want to keep to pacing the story instead of throwing it into the deep end. Doing a easy to follow model in a cycle will probably make this easier to read and write: 1st chapter from Halo prospective, 2nd from Mass Effect, 3rd from Spartan V which really blurs the line in the obvious cross over, then go back to Halo prospective. That should work for Section I until things get interesting.\*\*

\*\*In case you didn't notice (not that it's even noticeable to begin with), the mystery weapon as an Avenger M-8 with incendiary rounds...\*\*

\*\*\_PS: Finally a Chapter headed with a ME quote. Quotes from Mass Effect that are relevant are quite few and far between actually.\_\*\*

## 5. II - Passing Into Memory

\*\*\_Chapter II: Passing Into Memory\_\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em>"The peaceful one is at war without and within."  
â€"The Mantle, Fifth Permutation of the Didact's Number<em>\*</p></strong>

\* \* \*

><p>The world around him was cold, freezing. Unlike his earlier experience, he knew that now he could really feel his surroundings when pulled into the Leviathan's dream scape, fully under the artifact's power.<p>

"We must admit, we were surprised when you returned," a voice behind him announced, and Shepard spun around to see the fake Doctor Garnau they encountered on that asteroid, strolling towards him, possibly still one of the Leviathans most favorite avatars. They stood again, floating above the endless ocean, though this time it was different. The water below was not murky, but clear and sky was free of any clouds, a red sun illuminating the planet, both the sky and ocean glittering gold.

"I was surprised myself that you answered my call," Shepard responded, looking at the Leviathan. He recognized the voice that he had encountered on Omega, the softer spoken Leviathan rather than the significantly booming other one he originally encountered when he uncovered their kind.

>"Aren't you worried that I'm tracing you back to your new lair?"<p>

"The one that keeps the artifact, your scientist, is still our thrall," the Leviathan reminded him, "we see through her eyes that you have no such apparatus required to do so."

It was like them. Always thinking ahead and making minimal risks. It was also unfortunate that Ann Bryson was still under a limited influence of the Leviathan's indoctrination. She seemed absolutely normal when they met, though doubtlessly, the Leviathans were simply keeping their distance. They wanted him here, trapped in their realm. He knew that too, and both he and Ann had been aware of the risks of this. She'd been skeptical at first, but suddenly the whole conversation suddenly swung towards allowing him into the artifact's presence, probably a sub-conscious suggestion of the Leviathan.

It was a real danger to him coming back here, but he needed to understand.

"I came back," Shepard told the creature, "I... acted hastily the last time we met. I want you to explain further, what you meant. What do you really want?"

"Our rightful place in the galaxy, as the true inheritors of the Mantle," the Leviathan answered him, "civilizations have carried it before, but none have upheld more greatly than our apex kind. Over time, that Mantle was passed down through the cycles from species to species, acting as caretakers while we were confined to the shadows. The Reapers themselves, their guiding intelligences, are also programmed and were dedicated to upholding the Mantle, under their own interpretation of it."

"So now that the Reapers are gone?" Shepard questioned.

"As we said, then it will be time for our kind to restore unity to the stars. It is unquestionable, that in the earliest days on the universe, that even our ancient predecessors knew that it was us, who could enforce the Mantle for all of eternity. It was our destiny. Now we have learned from our mistakes, and grown infinity wiser from it. For the Mantle to be upheld, all chaos must be purged," the Leviathan explained.

"Like Synthetic life?" Shepard questioned, folding his arms. The Leviathan didn't deny it, but nodded.

"Your own view on such things may be colored differently than ours. Machines cannot respect the Mantle. They corrupt it, interpreting that their 'infinite' lives have greater priority over that of the short flickers than is organic life," the Leviathan hissed. "They have destroyed it before, among those who came before us. We only wanted to make sure that never happened again. Our creation of the intelligences you know as Reapers was not hastily as you suspect. They were programmed with an incorruptible and uncorrectable adherence to the Mantle, which could not be broken. Over time, as the intelligences studied the galaxy, they came to the conclusion that all life could not be saved, and an overwhelming majority of lives would be saved through sacrificing others."

"That's not quite an old philosophy," Shepard shrugged. "Your mistake was forcing blind adherence upon them."

"Indeed. We have grown wiser from that. Our own prospective only counted life that was current, but the machines count all life, now and into the endless future. They were a mistake. No machine can truly ever comprehend the Mantle in its pure form."

"Your constant speak of this Mantle... it's your duty to protect life. What do you get out of it? And where did it come from?" Shepard questioned. Like the Leviathan's own previous personal coloring of events, he placed his bets on it being another shading of their own arrogant 'right' to rule the galaxy.

"All advanced organic civilizations will inevitably see its logic," the Leviathan claimed. "The Mantle itself, possibly predates the creation of our galaxy, possibly even our universe."

How long it has flowed, is unknown, but what is known is that at some time, the strongest created it, passed it on to those under them when they fell to the chaos. It must be understood that the Mantle is simply our name for it, in your language. It is not a thing, but an idea. The one and only guardians must preserve all. Preservation is a universal concept. All understand that.

>While it is not incorruptible, it is all we have. In the Reaper's reign, that idea has fallen clumsily from one kind to the next. Some species have slaughtered each other over claim to it. Some only saw it as power, and bent it to their own needs. Clear violations, and the Reapers butchered them all for it, pre-space flight or not, as their programming does not allow it to be anything else than the classic interpretation that was common during our rule of the stars."<p>

"The machines would probably see this typical of organics," Shepard

answered, reminded of Legion's explanation of organic's bloody history, a conflict over ideas. "You all tried to inherit a concept were there can only be one. You all have different ideas of what it means. Your own interpretation is probably different than what your predecessors thought."

"That is true," the Leviathan admitted, "but none have been as glorious as ours. The coming of a perfect guardian, a guardian that would last as protectors of all for the rest of eternity as always be prophesied by all cultures. We believed, and still believe, we are that guardian. When all the stars were under our thrall, there was no war, no violence, and no corruption. Their minds may not have been free, but they were protected."

"One of your fellow kind, told me that you could never protect your thralls against themselves?" Shepard questioned.

"You misinterpret, like many of the young races. While we controlled them, purged all wrongdoing from them, we could not protect them from hurting themselves while attempting to do good. Building machines, was one of those many things that had unintended consequences for them. Those who built automatons only sought to benefit the rest of their kind, not destroy them," the Leviathan explained. It shifted its stance, glaring at him.

>"I know what you're seeking from this conversation, Commander. You wish to find a flaw in our reasoning. While we know even we are not perfect, we know we are the best hope the universe has for preservation and peace. Currently, no hold the Mantle. It is a perfect time for us to become its reclaimer."<p>

"You're a bit hypocritical of the Reapers," Shepard suggested, not dropping the subject. "Getting up at them for sacrificing lives for others, when you supposedly did the exact same on Omega, and you couldn't even give a good reason for it."

"There is reason," the Leviathan claimed. "You just haven't seen it yet. We have longer foresight than the younger races. To reveal it to you now would make all that sacrifice in vain. A few dead to return all to the endless peace is far more acceptable than trillions slaughtered to continue an endless reign of destruction."

"Suppose your right, if you're telling the truth," Shepard replied, still not convinced that he was getting the truth. It didn't sit right with him, doing the same thing but on a lesser scale. It was still murder supposedly justified to generate an end goal. Did the Leviathans really need to take all those lives on Rannoch? Did they really need every last innocent life? They could have provoked the Geth, wrecking shipyards, and destroying programs they themselves didn't even judge to be 'living', yet they preyed upon others that cooperated with the machines. It reeked of the Leviathan's personnel vendetta against synthetics.

>The Mantle sounded like a perfect concept in theory, but it was always organic's greed that probably always undoes it all.<p>

"I still want to know why, though," Shepard told it, not giving up. "Give me your reason. Tell me why."

"If we did, you could never return to your civilization," the Leviathan warned, "or else you would place that very reason in jeopardy. However, if you yourself were to become a crusader of the

Mantle... then you would know of its enforcement."

Did the Leviathan just extend to \_share\_ its Mantle? And recruit him at the same time? It didn't seem particularly appealing to him, but it was calming. It was a sure example the Leviathan's weren't playing with his mind, because he felt no desire to go along with their plans.

"You want me to fight for your Mantle?" Shepard questioned, folding his arms.

"You would be a perfect one to do so. Your defeat of the Reapers was a grand feat, none before you surpassing such personal greatness," the Leviathan told him. "When my bond mate probed your mind when you intruded our lair, he saw more than just an organic's wired programming to escape its own death. He saw courage and unmatched confidence in a cause to save all life, regardless of their own intention. You are worthy."

He really hadn't expected such complainants from a Leviathan. Maybe it felt comforting to have one with an uninfluenced opinion judge your actions correct. The second thought that occurred to him, was the Leviathan he was speaking to female? It seemed so, though there was hardly much of a noticeable difference in the voice asides from the softer tone. It felt less assaulting than the booming arrogance he had first encountered from that Leviathan.

>Did the Leviathans share memories amongst themselves? It could explain why this particular Leviathan had avatars that mimicked those of her possible equivalent to a husband, as well as his own memories and unspoken opinions of the creature it encountered.<p>

Maybe the compliments or some less honest force was coloring his own opinion now, as he inquired further.

"I thought the Mantle could only have one guardian?" Shepard questioned.

"And one guardian we shall be," the Leviathan agreed. "You would be our crusader, but more than a thrall; a position few have held in the past. Make no mistake, it would not be a place to take lightly. It requires all the sacrifice that can be called from one."

"I... couldn't do that," Shepard answered. What it was asking from him, was that he give up everything he'd ever held dear. It would mean breaking his promise...

"We know your uneasy mind," the Leviathan answered, probably not a coincidence it would guess his thoughts. "Even from our last exchange, we could sense the overwhelming cynicism in your mind that you could do all that you promised to others. You are aware that there are great chances that you couldn't fulfill them."

>We understand that by accepting the offer, becoming our agent, you would immediately forsake all that you loved. However, like many things, it is for the greater good of all."<p>

"Sometimes, that's too great a cost to take," Shepard shook his head, glaring at the Leviathan. It shifted its avatar, from the Blue Sun's leader Ajax, to Ann Bryson, to many of its other appearances. For a second, he may have formed into Tali, but immediately wiped it away when it sensed his oncoming reaction.

"I make no lies when I state the galaxy is a dangerous place more than ever now," the Leviathan told him. "All your stars gathered together in your known space are but only a tiny grain of sand when the galaxy is looked down upon. We already know of threats that rally at your borders... some that may strike within even your lifetime."

Now it was trying to intimidate him? He grew impatient with this.

"What are you trying to say?"

"No lies. You yourself are a great defender... you defeated the Reapers, and they even bested even us once... but everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. Those who conquer, slay, and therefore offend the Mantle. We know that it will be many centuries until we have the power to oppose them, but... if you became the shining example of your own collective civilizations willingness to uphold the preservation of life, then perhaps your civilization might hold some priority in the eyes of our kind."

"Your offering protection that may or may not be, in exchange for my acceptance of becoming your henchmen?" Shepard questioned the obvious.

"Protection that you may just need..." the Leviathan hinted at, "as you said before: organic history is filled with bloodshed because of differences. You must be aware, that your civilization will inevitably be opposed by others with different ideas."

"If I don't accept?" he asked, shrugging.

"Then you will leave this place, free, but without your answers," the Leviathan answered him. "Your chances of fulfilling your promises will stay as they are... but standing with me, there is quite some heightened chance that at least some of those promises will be fulfilled... and your civilization will not be left to stand on its own against the rising chaos."

"You'd think I'd accept?" Shepard asked. If this Leviathan was the key to safeguarding the galaxy's future... even Tali's future, then was it really something he could throw away? What if past all the words of self-sacrifice and dedication to preservation, all Leviathans were still the self-serving arrogant creatures he originally thought them to be? Was it really worth it?  
>Was there really a greater threat?<p>

"Your mind is at war with itself. We cannot make any assumptions from that," she admitted. "We know you are a caring soul, but also one with the ability to realize what is necessary. Go alone, and you are running a risk of failing... stand with me however, and I will not break our agreement until dying breath."

"This rising chaos?" he questioned.

"It is a threat to us all. Chaos is not just machines, but all that seek to conquer and kill. Without the Reaper's influence, now the amount of it among the galaxy is a hundredfold. There are those out there who know of your worlds: Earth, Palavan, Thessia, Sur'Kesh,



Rannoch, and yet you do not know of even their existence. They are not bound by the constraints the Reapers placed upon you... and will prove to be your greater threat."

"Right..." Shepard responded, his mind suddenly clicking with information he received before this even began. There were the theories of the invisible star ships that were supposedly spying on them. Were their intentions malevolent?  
>"And together we'd stand against them?"<p>

"Correct. I possess no wish to see your civilization extinguished," the Leviathan told him. "I know for certain that you don't either. These invaders have tread upon the ashes of those who held the Mantle before, gazed down upon them... and turned their heads away, uninterested in it. They do not share ideological concepts, and only seek our destruction or conquest."

"I need to know what that threat is," Shepard demanded, "I wouldn't even consider agreeing with you, if the only thing you can give is hints."

"Then I must show it to you, through my own eyes..." the Leviathan's avatar threw his head back, staring into the sun. Shepard slowly saw the make shift world collapse around him, consumed. He couldn't see even his own body now, becoming a set of floating disembodied eyes.

The first thing the Leviathan showed him was fleets of ships advancing towards the Citadel, bulky vessels large as Dreadnoughts. He blinked, and the ships had disappeared, only for the Citadel's arms to go up in flames. He was floating miles away from the titanic space station, yet he felt the urge to swim through space towards it, to see the destruction closer up. Before he could do so, the world changed again.

Hundreds of worlds, burning, being bombed, completely annihilated. It was almost worse than his vision from the Protheans of the Reaper's coming. He saw fields of dead crops, and starving peoples, dying out as great unnatural super famines swept across their worlds. He saw entire ecosystems being consumed into some biomass, as it rampaged and consumed everything it saw...

The world began to collapse away, the chaos growing uncontrollably until only extermination swept across the stars. Massive fleets of machines roamed, vaporizing entire moons with their collective firepower. Winds, great thermal bursts carried along the ruins of entire star systems through the stars, showers of rocks that could sweep away anything in its path. The scale of the tragedy, was beyond anything even once thought possible.

It was horrifying, and he couldn't take his eyes away. Finally, the entire galaxy was consumed in fire... and then went silent.

His response progressed rapidly. First, he was in disbelief; almost a denial of this, trying to even doubt this as some kind of trick, some horror to force him to their side... though, as he saw the vision before him consuming his attention, he almost forgot something else far more important. He felt another mind, one connected to his. It felt fear. The Leviathan felt real unquestionable terror of this. He almost wondered if it was alike to what Javik felt when he looked

into others.

The Leviathans could be intimidated, exterminated and destroyed. They were only mortal, and they felt fear of their destruction. He understood it.

They returned to the calming ocean scenery and both his body and the Leviathan's avatar: now Ann, returned.

"This is all I fear to come," the Leviathan announced to him. "The only thing that can excel the brutal extermination from the machines, is us organics waging unstoppable wars upon each other. The Mantle must return, peace restored, or all the galaxy will be consumed as it was before."

"This has happened before?" He felt scared to ask. How could the galaxy even recover from such depths of destruction?

"It has happened many times. Once the violence begins, it cannot be stopped. Aggression and Xenophobia become way of life, and soon war becomes what all organics thrive on. Only the Mantle has ever driven back this chaos, returned the galaxy to order," the Leviathan claimed. "I would return the Mantle myself, but we are too weak now, to enforce any peace. This is why you may be our last hope."

"Then... what would you have me do?" Shepard questioned. The visions of destruction and death had hypnotized him, galvanized him into action. He saw the clarity of the chaos which he saw shown, and knew it was no lie. He needed to stop it, just as he did the Reapers.

"Delay it. Hold the chaos back for as long as you can, allow us to strengthen," the Leviathan explained, "all of both our kinds have their existence threatened. Join with me, and we together can halt this."

"I can never go back?" Shepard questioned, though his sub-conscious might as well slapped him for asking such a question.

\_You're turning you're back on her... she'd understand, wouldn't she? I need to do this. This is what she would expect of me.\_

"You can never be what you were before. Joining with us, your mind will become bound to mine. Our only concern from then forward would be to halt the chaos."

He didn't like the sound of being bound to a Leviathan, even if mentally. He didn't like being changed either, becoming someone else... even if it was for the right price. He just wanted to beg for everyone to understand...

\_Do you want me to break my promise? Even if it meant saving our lives? Saving everybody's lives? I can't just turn my back on this...\_

"I'm... not sure," he answered. He could walk away right now... but never do anything. What if destiny required that his work never be done?

What if he was standing on another ruined world in so many years' time, faced with the fact that it had only happened because he'd turned his back on the galaxy's only hope for salvation?  
>How would he become this guardian? Would he simply seek the Leviathan out? Or would they take him to them? Would they even meet again at all? Would everyone know he was gone?<p>

\_I want you to know, I left because it was necessary. Damn... I wish... I didn't need this...\_

"There is nothing more I can tell you, until you join with us," the Leviathan answered. "It is time for you to choose."

"Then..."

\_Please... forgive me...\_

"I'll accept, for now."

"Thank you, Commander. You shall be greater than you where before. Now we shall become one guardian... and the no one shall stop the reclamation of the Mantle..."

The Leviathan's avatar reached forward and grasped his hand, and what was left of the world disappeared and he was consumed...

\* \* \*

><p>Garrus shook his head, barely breaking through the shock that had washed over him.<p>

"Spirits... no..." He whispered, and Bau could only nod and agree.

"Doctor Bryson told me he knew the risks... we should all be envious of his courage," the Salarian Spectre told him, glancing down at the body before them.

"When I have to share this news..."

"It will be hard, I know," Bau told him. "The great Commander Shepard is dead... we took possession of, and contained the artifact."

"How did this happen? There should have been safety measures," Garrus questioned.

"Ann Bryson told us that he was insistent on viewing the Artifact unshielded as quickly as possible. She claims that she told him that she might not be the best for watching over him, but he went on with it anyway. When she unshielded the artifact, she said she lost consciousness. From there... he remained close enough to the artifact for too long, the Leviathan building up the strength of the connection to his mind long to undertake some kind of scrub," Bau explained. "Now... even if you could do your Lazarus Project, the brain would still be fried. He's gone."

Garrus continued to knell beside the deceased Commander who was laying on the lab's floor, eyes closed. There was no pulse, no beat. His entire brain had been fried, and the body no longer knew how to

function. The damn squids had killed him. They'd killed him.

\_Dammit Shepard... why did you have to do this alone? Why go at all?  
How Tali will react...\_

He rolled the body over, much to the annoyance of the nearby C-Sec Officers standing by, but there was probably nothing this crime scene could tell them that they already didn't know. Shepard unshielded the Leviathan artifact... and it had killed him.

>Garrus reached into his jacket and tore off the N7 dog tags, holding them up, glaring at them.<p>

\_I swear you'll get payback one day... somehow...\_

"I know, we both wish there was something more we could do," Bau told him. "I honestly don't how anyone will deal with this."

"Neither do I..." Garrus admitted. "I've had to deliver enough bad news this month as it is. This? I don't know if I could tell anybody about this..."

"You don't," Bau answered, "everyone will hear the news soon enough."

"No," the Turian Spectre shook his head. "The last thing the people who knew him deserve, is to hear of his death through a damn news broadcast. I'll tell them myself, even if I have to outrun the Comm Relays."

"I understand," Bau nodded. "We can request the Council place an information embargo on this, stop the word getting out before you've done what needs to be done."

"Thanks, Bau... I just never thought this could happen..." Garrus admitted, placing the dog tags in a storage compartment on the side of his armor. The Salarian Spectre gave one final disapproving glare at the body.

"As they say: not all stories have happy endings," Bau told him, pausing before adding: "though this one desperately needed it..."

\* \* \*

><p>The next week was one tragic announcement to another. He'd dispatched messages to the minor crewmen of the Normandy's flights, those who had stood by the Commander's side at any time, known or unknown by himself. He informed them of that, and asked them to keep that information only to them for now. He expected them to honor that.<p>

For those who were apart of the Ground Team, or were a major part of the crew, he wished to visit them all personally and inform them of the events, though that was hardly possible. He started with those close to begin with. He'd met with Joker and Edi who were still waiting down in the docking bay with the Normandy, expecting the Commander to return any moment, or even contact them.

As usual, Joker busted off the usual comments when he saw him coming. He soon went silent after hearing the news. Nobody would be returning to captain the Normandy, and it was likely now that the ship wouldn't

be lifting off anytime soon. They couldn't believe it. The immortal Shepard, who had cheated death before, had finally fallen.  
>They would stay with the Normandy for now, until it was decided on just what to do with the vessel.<p>

That was only the beginning of it. Soon, he moved on to the crew in general proximity. He eventually passed a message on to the Urdnots on Tuchunka. Wrex was simply silent, no doubt keeping his own bitterness at Shepard's passing locked up inside. Grunt however, instantly demanded to know where the Leviathan's were so he could kill them all. Many were angry, yes.

He eventually contacted many of the former SR1 crew. Kaiden was still a Spectre, and knew of what happened on the Citadel. He too harbored his own bitter anger of what had happened. He wished he'd been there to help.

>Liara herself couldn't believe it. She first refused to acknowledge it was entirely true, and then slowly moved onto accepting that. She blamed herself for not doing more about tracking the Leviathans, though there wasn't anything any of them could do now.<p>

For many of the SR2 crew had simply disappeared, they were much harder to find and inform. The Ex-Cerberus duo of the ground team had turned over a new leaf and gone onto their own new lives, he sent both Jacob and Miranda the message and hoped they would receive it. As for Kasumi and Zaeed, even if they were still alive, he would have no idea of where they were, but he hoped they would still also hear of it.

>He went through all the remaining contacts, dispatching messages. He hit the last few on the contact list, Jack and Samara, though the later might never find the message, much less respond to it. Jack however, contacted him and began to shout, demanding why the rest of them had been on the Citadel and had done nothing. Eventually, she overcame her rage, and apologized for the outburst.<p>

After that, there were few remaining. James didn't believe it at first either, the N7 Marine refuting to believe Shepard would be dead until they buried the body. When he contacted Javik; who currently had departed with a group of Hanar followers to hunt down any possible further Prothean enclaves, had responded with only his trademark unwavering attitude, though he struggled to find words to describe the tragedy of the former Commander's passing.

>They all grieved, even mourned, the loss of what had truly been a great man.<p>

After all that... there was only one person left to inform, probably the hardest. He didn't know how she'd react. He could only make this as easy as possible... which wasn't very easy, to be honest. It took him long enough to even get to Rannoch, negotiating his way with Admiral Raan who he explained the situation, and she understood well what this would mean.

Now, he was here.

"I... I knew he wouldn't coming back... I just knew..." Tali muttered through her sobbing. She had simply slumped against the wall and slid to the floor, cradling her helmeted head in her hands as she wept.  
"Keelah... I need to say it... when he didn't contact me... I thought he'd... no..."

"If there is anything, Tali, I'm here," Garrus told her, as she had almost simply curled up into a ball. He knew this was coming, but he hated to see her this way. "Whatever you have to say..."

"No, you're not listening... when he didn't contact me... I thought he'd simply chosen to leave..." she admitted, which unexpectedly shocked him. He almost called out on that, but he knew this wasn't the time.

"You know he'd never do that. I know him better than that," he told her, kneeling beside her.

"No... It's not because he didn't love me... it's because he always knew that our promise was a dream..." she stopped, her eyes barely visible behind the mask when they were flooded with tears. He placed his hand on her shoulder, though he lacked any words appropriate for that. Say it wasn't? He was gone now, so that might just make it worse.

>"I know a few who'd make a fit about us staying together here... even if he'd live here... he'd still probably make me sick... he never wanted that. Spending all this time on Rannoch, and I wouldn't be able to take off my mask like all the others?"<p>

"That wouldn't be true," he insisted, continuing to try and comfort her. She was babbling, trying to justify what had gone on in her life for the last six years. It was saddening to him that she thought this way, trying to generate cynicism in order to convince herself that this was the only possible outcome.

"After the war ended, he tried to convince me to simply go home, without him for now, and that he'd eventually come when he'd finished up all his work with the Reapers... I'm glad I didn't..." she shook her head. "He spent six years chasing things... six years spent living in the past. We should have spent the time we had together, being happy... not miserly shuffling from one hell to another..."

"He wanted to keep helping people," Garrus told her. "It's what he did."

"And now he's dead..." she sobbed again, bundling her head up in her hands. "I just want him back..."

"We both know that's no longer possible," he told her, "and he wouldn't have wanted you to spend the rest of your life mourning him."

"I know..." she shook her head. "But I can't move on... this is my fault..."

"Dammit, Tali, we've already got enough people taking the fall for this," he told her. One of those people might have been himself. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I shouldn't have left him... I was just so tired, so... gah... instead, I let him go off and get himself killed... this is all my fault..."

"Honestly... it isn't..."

She slowly stopped sobbing, glancing up for a second.

"I'm just... so sorry... life will never be the same again..."

"It won't... but that doesn't mean we can't go on living," he insisted. She didn't respond, choosing to stay silent. He continued to stand by her for entire minutes that passed by. Finally, she raised her head out of her hands again. She shook her head, trying to clear her eyes of tears behind her mask. She slowly recovered.

"I understand what you mean..." Tali finally told him.

"We'll never forget him... but for now, you might just need to relax," Garrus responded. He slowly took her arm and helped her herself as she staggered back to her feet. "Take a while to recover."

"No..." she refuted. "I won't rest... not while his work is unfinished. I have to come with you."

"Tali, no," he refused, "I'm still a Spectre, and as much as I'd like to, I know I can't go on a revenge hunt for Leviathans. You need to stay on Rannoch, enjoy the life he wanted you to have..."

"I won't take no for an answer," he insisted, definitely not giving up. Her voice was still strained with stress. "He may have made promises, but I made some too. He wouldn't just want us to give up fighting because he's dead."

"There are no-"

"It wasn't just against squids! Anything! I just-"

"No," he seized her arm, trying to calm her. "I know your angry... but don't be hasty. You just need to calm down."

"Yes..." she accepted, sighing. She lowly lowered herself down to sit on a nearby chair, gazing down. "I just-"

"You're mourning, I understand," Garrus told her, taking a seat beside her. "I've seen it all too well before."

"I'm angry too... he didn't deserve to die like that, to survive all this to get killed by some fish with a grudge..." she began to sob a little again.

"I think that too, but it's not like we can undo that," he repeated, "just rest."

They sat in silence again for a minute or two. While the tears, or at least the sobbing since he couldn't be sure, had stopped, she still gazed at the ground, no doubt overwhelmed in the loss. Finally, she whispered again.

"Will he get a burial?" she questioned.

"The answer to that question is obvious," he answered, nodding. Of course, the greatest hero they'd ever known would get a burial.

"Oh... it would just feel so weird... twice now... even back then, it hurt me, now... I wish I could just place all my hopes on waiting another two years..."

"I'm sorry, but we both know that the extra lucky got two lives, I doubt whatever power that where could grant a third," Garrus mused, hating to say that himself. While honestly, the spirits meant no more than a saying to him or many other Turians now, he still wished there was at least something out there that could guide Shepard back to this world again, to fix this mess.

"I...don't want to be there, again," she muttered.

"I know. You may change your mind, but that's your decision," he replied.

"Hm," she nodded in acknowledgement. "I... I just need to be alone... time to let it sink in..."

"Okay," he answered, but he really didn't feel comfortable with that, though her aunt was here to watch over her. He slowly rose back up to his feet, and walked towards the exit.

>"I won't be leaving immediately, so know I'm here..."<p>

"I know..." she nodded slowly, "goodbye..."

He turned back to reply to that, but she was still staring forward, as if lost in thought. He chose not to say anything, and left.

\* \* \*

><p>Rannoch's temperature wasn't anywhere near hot by Turian standards, though it wasn't like he could feel it through his sealed suit. He could still feel the hard concrete underfoot though, and hear the whirling of his suit's air filters as it actually cooled his own environment to prevent heating as the harsh sun glared on him.<p>

It had been half a week, and now he was departing. As much as he hated it, there wasn't much he could do. Now, he had returned to the space port which he originally arrived, standing amongst a cluster of battered shuttles and various heavily aged craft. He remembered this place from memory, the first properly constructed landing sight built by the Quarrians following their resettlement of Rannoch.

>The Normandy had landed here once when Shepard had returned to the planet to resolve prior issues between the Quarrians and Geth when a formal treaty of peace was signed. They'd spent weeks working out issues that threatened the peace, and eventually it was resolved with all armed Geth platforms being removed from Rannoch, a necessary appeasement.<p>

\_Once again, just another example of him spending time that was his, helping others and doing what they couldn't. He will be missed.\_

"Thank you, for seeing to informing her personally..." Admiral Raan told him as they walked to the landing area where his Shuttle was waiting.

>"We know that this will be hard on Tali... but we couldn't have avoided it. I wish I could do more..."<p>



"When it comes to loss, there's not a lot much anyone can do," Garrus answered, finding himself quoting a small bit of conversation that stuck in his memory, his father on the subject of his mother. He pushed the sub-conscious quotation from his current thoughts.

"That is true," Raan nodded in agreement. "What I wished was that I could have done more previously... it scares me to think how much time it will take until the mourning stops... if she ever will stop mourning."

"She's strong... she'll recover," he answered, trying to believe that himself. He understood what Raan was plagued by, thoughts of another Zorah who'd lost so much, and simply distanced themselves from the world in order to deal with it.

"I certainly hope so..." Raan replied, turning. "You have been a good friend to her, and you should be proud of your own endurance. Farewell, Spectre."

He left Rannoch again, though he couldn't help but feel something more had happened than just the death of one, very successful, but also very mortal, Human. Without Shepard... the entire galaxy felt like it was unguarded, as if a time before the Normandy flew was not even imaginable anymore...

\_Picking up the torch as they say... it may be harder than Shepard himself thought.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterward:<strong>

\*\*The Mass Effect chapter promised. This took far longer that I wanted. I actually had a majority of the chapter written by the end of last weekend, but I wasn't able to get back on the PC to finish it all until now. As always, life is busy.\*\*

\*\*Hope you enjoy the new cover art I slapped together, nothing fancy. I've also finalized my long term plans for this story, plotting it out and all. While Section I won't tend to cross over much, it's the critical world building needed to set up this plot, instead of just rushing into it.\*\*

\*\*I seriously want to actually get around to doing a little world building in the Mass Effect universe, since so far it hasn't seen as much detail as the Halo Universe has. Next chapter is the Cross Chapter, the Spartan V Program, though when the rotation comes back to the Mass Effect Universe view, I actually hope to give us some serious details of just the standing point of the galaxy that just didn't fit into the general theme of this chapter.\*\*

## 6. III - Spartan

\_\*\*Chapter III: Spartan\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em>On and on shall old war go,<br>\*\*\*\*\_Without respite

my blood will flow  
><em>\*\*\*\*\_O'er your eyes 'til they cannot see  
><em>\*\*\*\*\_The impossibility of victory.\_\*\*

\*\*\_-Excerpt from the Writ of Union  
><em>\*\*\*\*\*\_Unknown Sangheili Author\_\*\*\*\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>A sudden rush and flurry of activity. Doctor Halsey reached forward and grasped the mug of coffee on her desk, and slowly sipped from it. Yes, this was quite familiar, as if she'd managed to turn back the clocks forty or so years, with some noticeable changes but the process similar enough. While she took no pleasure in doing this all over again, there was some feeling of acceleration, a small joy in actually beginning something with a lasting impact, a legacy.<p>

It was like that day all over again, and she had no intention of changing how it would play out, though she had changed the physical activity slightly since there was a much larger subject group.

While she didn't have, or could ever hope for, a drill instructor the caliber of Franklin Mendez, his replacement would be sufficient. Collin Tammerson had been hand picked by Vice Admiral Rich, with the full support of the V Program's AI Advisory Panel. After reading his profile, she was at least satisfied with the choice, the man having the traits of a imposing drill instructor but not as much experience in contrast to the Spartan II's instructor. Though, since it was hard to find people who understood the... nature of the ethical reasoning behind the program, she guessed it limited the Vice Admiral's choices down to a handful.

Currently, she had taken to watching the morning's proceedings from her office, simply drinking cups of coffee and watching the holographic screens in front of her main computer terminal. It was only eleven minutes past five in the Terran Standard, which followed Sydney GMT time, which was actually accurate here on Trevelyan, the Engineers complying with the request to accurately tune the Shield World that the particular sectors which the V Program operated in, to the standard day in the United Nations Space Command's capital.

>Chief Temmerson was preparing the instructors under his command to wake the subjects, equipping light armor and beginning to retrieve their stun batons. Halsey had Ananke run through the very same orders she had given for the first day of training for the Spartan II subjects. While some of the subjects would be partially willing in participate in the program, that may not be true for all, and a process was needed to acclimatize them to their training.<p>

On a view screen to the left of her, she could see views of the subjects who were currently still sleeping, perhaps now only managing to shake off the effects of drugs that had kept them asleep till the time was right. Soon, in ten minutes or less, the full process from turning this assortment of subjects into real soldiers, would begin.

"Everything is fully prepared and the first day of training ready to begin," Ananke manifested on the desk in front of her, the golden glowing AI grasping her hands behind her back. Her appearance had

changed somewhat since they first met, Ananke instead appearing wearing vibrant sandy robes and discarding the silver ancient armor of her previous appearance, most likely to seem more approachable. Ananke would be to the Spartan V's, as Deja was to Spartan II Program, a teacher. The AI Goddess glanced up at her, almost reluctant to ask a question.

"How long have you been watching the preparations?"

"You can't find that out yourself?" Halsey questioned, surprised she couldn't find that out herself.

"My programming has me dedicate processing power to tasks in a priority order, and I only have access to cameras inside your facility only when necessary..." Ananke explained, wriggling her hands behind her back as if a little embarrassed. ONI AI's liked the illusion amongst the organics that they knew everything. "It doesn't matter. You're obviously well aware of the current status."

"Indeed, I am," Halsey nodded, looking at the view screens. Temmerson was moving now, flanking by his subordinates as they headed towards the barracks area.

>"Everything should go ahead as planned, even with such a wide subject group."<p>

"With all preparation, I do expect every subject to be capable of complying," Ananke replied, nodding. The AI's avatar folded her arms. "My efforts have been thorough."

Halsey nodded in acknowledgement, looking down at her old wrist mounted analog watch. The hand struck twenty past five accurately, and Temmerson was beginning close as schedule as possible.

"I must inform you however, an unknown AI that has entered our system, has requested I pass on news that you shall be receiving a visitor... very shortly..." Ananke's brow raised, and her mouth formed into a frown.

"I wasn't alerted to this, earlier?" Halsey questioned, placing the coffee mug down on her desk. It was far more neat and tidy these days, though it wasn't like she cared for appearances anymore.

"This information was just passed onto me by our dumb project secretary AI, and is the exact reason I arrived. Our visitor is no doubt inbound as we speak," Ananke informed her, quite irritated by the lack of information herself. Not knowing something anomalous tended to frustrate artificial intelligences. "I myself, am certainly not a fan of being made unequal to other AI's, but that's hierarchy for you."

"Hardly your fault, Ann," Halsey shook her head briefly, twisting around in her chair to glance over at the door. "Such an unexpected visit points to a unfriendly arrival, doesn't it?"

"CINCONI doesn't sneak up on anyone," Ananke responded, theorizing. "Vice Admiral Rich would have certainly made his presence known. Any other ONI or any Human for that matter, doesn't have clearance to even come near our Program. Perhaps Director Hugo Barton has decided to come upon us yet again to complain about our future churning up of Trevelyan's dirt?"

"Hugo wouldn't have the power nor resources to disrupt me in what he knows is a crucial event," Halsey answered bitterly. She didn't need Ananke to guess for her. There was only one visitor capable of showing up like this. The fact that this visit was exactly coincided with the program's initiation? Too much convenience. She was meant to be offended.

>"No need to guess, Ann. I know who's coming."<p>

Halsey switched off the monitors; much to her disappointment, and navigated her chair to sit behind her desk in preparation for the eventual arrival. She decided to activate her data pad, skim some minor information just to pretend that this interruption now wasn't even a hindrance, perhaps even feign having no interest in watching the program begin. She intended to allow no satisfaction to this insult.

Ananke was forcefully cut away, the visitor's unknown AI companion ending their communication. Arrival was upon her.

"Doctor Halsey," Serin Osman's greeting was casual, neutral and lacking any malevolence or anything. Such could be expected. Without invitation, she grabbed a chair and dragged it over to sit directly in front of the desk.

"Captain Osman... or should it be Rear Admiral by now?" Halsey returned the greeting without any familiarity in return, not bothering to pretend to be anywhere near happy or plain subordinate to give the slightest bit of friendliness. For a moment, she stared into Osman's eyes, forming a slight confident smile.

\_See? I'm back in a lab, unguarded, and absolutely under no watch. Better yet, I'm back doing the same thing that was the basis for my so called 'arrest', all at the whims of your fabulous mentor and master... \_

Osman managed to contain herself, though visibly flinching for a second as she saw the smile on Halsey's face. While on no grounds to rub in her victory, Halsey kept the slight smirk.

"You are correct, Doctor," Osman finally answered, before deciding to press it. "So you should respond with the proper respect."

"Oh, I am indeed showing the respect that I would to any of the UNSC's Rear Admirals," Halsey responded, reaching down to disable the data pad on her desk. "May I just ask what brings you to my new facility, Rear Admiral?" she pressed the 'new' part. It had happened before and it was happening again. Because it was necessary.

\_I hope you understand that by now.  
><em>

"Don't play games with me, Doctor," Osman answered curtly. "You know why I'm here."

"I theorized as such, though I don't see why you'd be here seeing as I am currently operating under the blessings of our Admiral," Halsey almost let the satisfaction in her voice rise too far, though it was hard not to want some way of hitting back at Osman after she had attempted to turn everyone against her so many years ago, all on

Parangosky's bidding. She simply needed to show that for all the supposed moral high ground and accusations, all Osman's quest to bring her down simply another move in the politics and intrigue of ONI.

\_I can see it in you. You think that Parangosky was just using you. She never cared one bit about what happened in the Spartan Program, and for all that crusading, you were only just this: a puppet with a poisoned dagger. \_

"I said drop the games," Osman almost growled at her, her lack of constrain actually quite surprising. "You may think you've gotten off with only a fifteen year slapping on the wrist, but you should know that I have my eyes on you. When ONI changes hands, you should know that things may operate very differently."

Halsey gave that a slight pause, though she was hardly concerned. Even as CINCONI, Osman knew that she couldn't turn back the clock on a project her predecessor had significantly invested in, for good reasons.

"Will they?" Halsey raised the question, picking up her coffee mug and taking a slow sip from it to voice her lack of concern.

"I swear to you, they will," Osman answered, not dropping her gaze into the Doctor's eyes. "You may think you and the Vice Admiral's newest atrocity is protected, but that would change significantly."

"I doubt Parangosky kept you out of the loop when it came to our new discoveries," Halsey told her, placing the mug back down. "It's not like your hands were clean to begin with. I'll go with the assumption that you've grown up a little since we last met, and finally come to the conclusion on just what this is about," Halsey told her, ignoring Osman's seething at that commented. Despite the tempered rage displayed on Osman's face, Halsey leaned forward fearlessly.  
>"This is about survival."<p>

"Sometimes, it's more than that," Osman huffed, leaning forward over the desk to meet Halsey, still staring into her eyes with that furious, but contained anger.

"When it comes to intergalactic politics, it isn't," Halsey commented, pulling away to lean back in her office chair again, leaving Osman still glowering over the desk. "Even with the Insurrection, it was a do or die. Don't tell me, that you'd chose a small handful of innocents over the entire UNSC, if it came to it?"

"Don't try to compare us," Osman growled at her, her hands firmly placed on the desk as if ready to flip it over onto the old woman behind it. "You can't admit they've broken you down to the point that your ONI's loyal puppet, willing to commit any atrocity on their order."

"If I carry out evils on others behalf, how exactly is the blame solely on me?" Halsey pointed out, continuing the debate. "Like it or not, Serin, it was the likes of; maybe even, Parangosky herself that authored the Spartan Program. I simply had to carry it out. Why? Because if I didn't, someone less qualified would, and more would

pointlessly die."

"You bitch..." Osman simply muttered, perhaps now overly infuriated that this argument was not winnable.

"You never struck me as the kind to shy away from the hard choices," Halsey toned her voice down to somewhat neutral, making sure to make it come off as a comment instead of an insult. That might just go too far.

>"I do, or I die. Don't fool yourself that there is anybody out there that would do differently if placed in my shoes."<p>

"Don't fool yourself into thinking everyone in the world is like you," Osman responded, giving the desk a slight hammer with a slight smack with her hand. A clenched fist might have broken the desk into flying shrapnel.

>"You know there were ONI agents that refused orders to help your project and died for it . Of all people, you need to see that you're wrong."<p>

That actually managed to silence Halsey, the Doctor frowning as she subconsciously rolled her chair back slightly. Finally, she had her answer.

"So assuming everything went to Parangosky's finely set out plans, and you had the power to stop me, you'd do it, even though you know that you can't save these subjects now? You can't wind back time, and you certainly can't help them. Why not let it serve the greater cause, as our fine leader intended it to?" Halsey questioned, giving Osman her own moment in silence.

"I wouldn't," Osman finally answered, tackling the question head on instead of dodging it like so many others would have done. "I've seen the Intel on the System's Alliance, what we've gleamed from their secrets. Even they never resorted to this kind of evil when faced with annihilation. Sooner or later, we're going to have to prove that we can act with the same integrity."

Halsey could only grin at that. "You must have not read all the data, Serin, or perhaps you're trying to slip some of the facts by? The word Teltin mean anything? We're a legalized Cerberus Network, by parallel standards..."

Osman finally gave up trying to keep some restraint, and simply swiped up the data pad off the desk, knocking papers and even a terminal off it and onto the floor. She held the data pad in hand for a second, studying it, before snapping it in half, the screen shattering, and dropping it on the floor.

"When we arrested you, one of my subordinates thought he should have shot you, killed you," Osman admitted, "stop you from harming anyone else ever again and to give you the punishment you truly deserved. Back then, I was foolish enough to believe you'd get it. Honestly, I should have killed you myself."

Halsey frowned, studying Osman carefully. For the first time in the conversation, Osman broke eye contact.

"Believe me, I take no pleasure in this," Halsey told her, undertaking the effort to stay leaned forward on the desk and not

shrinking back further. "You're not here because you hate what I'm doing, you're here because you're frustrated because you think Parangosky has been lying to you."

Osman glared back at up at her. Years in solitude hadn't dulled Halsey's ability to read people and guess motivations. Halsey continued,  
>"in truth, at the time, she may have meant every word. However, circumstances change. We didn't need another Spartan Program then, but we both know we need one now."<p>

"You're already assuming that they'll be war," Osman commented without emotion.

"I've witnessed decades of what could be considered some of the most monumental developments in Human history," Halsey told her. "I've seen Humanity's true side throughout it all. Two nations who only know themselves as the complete unopposed representation of their species could never simply tolerate each other. Even if there isn't war, it'll get ugly, and in the end, only one will survive, and this new program shall further the chances of that surviving faction being ours."

"I refuse to believe that's all that drives you," Osman didn't move, completely stone as she stared at Halsey.

"It's probably all I have left," Halsey replied without hesitation, "you've taken everything else from me."

That ended the conversation. The two sat in silence, still not breaking eye contact. Halsey didn't relent one bit. After an entire minute in silence, they finally spoke.

"Do you think of them as people?" Halsey questioned, leaning back. "our new subjects, I mean."

"If they're intelligent enough to become your tools, then probably so," Osman answered, before replying with the same question. "Do you?"

"A little bit, yes. I find some humor in that I originally dehumanized my view on you and your comrades during training in order to better cope with what I was doing to you myself, but I eventually gave that up. I tried not to care about using Human subjects, now I'm trying to care about using alien subjects. The complete reverse, now really," Halsey commented, the admission nowhere humorous, but she was trying to see the light side of it in the irony.

"If this does lead to war," Osman commented, breaking eye contact again to look down at the broken data pad, "you better hope you're victorious, because I don't think any of our enemies would take kindly to the fact that you abducted and experimented on their children before it even began."

"If we succeed, there will never be any wars," Halsey answered, reaching down at grabbing some of the papers that had previously been knocked off the desk. "That's been ONI policy since the Covenant War. End any conflict before it even begins."

Osman simply nodded in acknowledgement, rising up from where she sat

down.

"This meeting has been interesting, Doctor Halsey," Osman told her. "You were right about something. I still would tell you however, that this might be the last project you direct."

"I hope so," Halsey simply nodded in return. "That would require either my death or the lack of further justifying conflict. Either one will do great good for this galaxy."

Osman frowned for a second, before turning and leaving the room. The door slid itself back shut behind her. Halsey couldn't help it as a slight grin came to her face.

\_It took you a while, but you finally see it. I only do what is necessary. \_

Without pause, she hit the power button on the projector on her desk and rebooted the system. Eventually, Ananke fluttered back into a visual form from the static.

"Being cut off without warning is unpleasant," Ananke simply told her, the AI clenching her hands tightly behind her back, "no... insufferable."

"Thank my guest," Halsey muttered, turning to the screens behind her. "I assume you've already begun writing two hundred and fifty different subject reports in my absence?"

"You missed the beginning, but I wouldn't say you missed much. All Tammerson is doing, is currently already marching every subject around the entire Dyson sphere," Ananke humored her, "seriously, is a fast jog all he has planned for this morning?"

"It's only been five minutes," Halsey glanced down at her watch. Ananke shook her head.

"You know five minutes might as well be five centuries for me. Hard to make any physiological evaluations other than only one of them has fallen flat on their face yet."

"Number?"

"Subject V-93."

"Makes sense," Halsey nodded, kicking away the shards of her broken data pad. She pulled out some old fashion paper out of her desk and used her pen to make a few notes she wanted to move out of her mind to a more permanent location. At her age now, she had lost the sharp memory of her youth. Because of that, now she needed to do trivial things such as write notes.

>"Still considering a repair process?"<p>

"Such would no longer be beneficial now that the program is underway," Ananke replied, folding her arms. "I speculate 93's clumsiness is simply due to lack of proper physical activities before recruitment, not due to any current emotional burdens."

Halsey begun reactivating the monitor screens, and Ananke directed them to the point of interest.



"They'll shape up eventually, Ann," Halsey replied, watching on.

"They'll do or they die," Ananke simply quoted, nodding.

\* \* \*

><p>His eyes snapped open. At first, he couldn't tell what was being shouted, but unlike what was being yelled at him, pain couldn't be ignored.<p>

Baal; as his guardian had named him, yelped as something struck his side, causing him to roll forward and off the cot. He struck the floor, a hard metallic surface, and groaned. He clenched his side where he'd been struck, gritting his teeth. The lapse of pain was good. It helped him refresh his memory, understand why he was here. He remembered last night... or was it two nights ago now?

He glanced up, and there was a uniformed man standing over him, prodding him with the deactivated stun baton. Baal didn't react at first, still too shocked. Finally, the man shook his head in disgust, and clicked the switch on the baton to reactivate it.

Baal leaped, quickly stumbling to his feet. He stumbled, and almost fell back down again in his haste. He didn't know why, but his body felt numb, his movements alien and unfamiliar. What had changed?

He glanced down at himself, studying. For a moment, he looked at himself. He knew he was still himself, so what had happened. Baal knew something was strange. Was he dreaming again?

"Hey!" the uniformed man shoved him, causing Baal to stagger back again. "Look at me, maggot!"

Baal fearfully met the gaze of the adult who stared into his eyes. His gaze was hard to hold without shrieking away, two old withered eyes that seemed to stare into his soul. If this wasn't real, it was a nightmare. He felt to urge to run, to escape, to flee.

Though from the cries and shouts around him, he doubted that was possible. Baal shifted his gaze for a second to what was going on around him, and ended up glaring way longer than he planned. He saw them, his brothers and sisters which he remembered, suffering as he did. Finally, his glare was broken as activated stun baton was thwacked against his arm, causing him to yelp again. It was a lesser shock than before, but painful none the less.

"I swear kid, if you go daydreaming one more time again, these shocks will get a whole lot harder!" the handler shouted in Baal's face. "Gear up already, recruit! Get yourself together now!" he repeated it twice in case the child didn't understand, though Baal still gazed at him, totally lost.  
>"That means, get dressed!"<p>

That was something he could understand. On the front of his cot, a tunic was left folded. Again, something felt off about it. It was prickly and irritated him, something he hadn't felt before. It was far too big too, the sleeves dangling from his arms. Though, from the looks of it, this was shared amongst his siblings, who had also now

begun to pull the black shirts over their heads.

As soon as they all completed this simple task, he was once again shouted at with instructions to get moving. They were all marched outside of the barracks, a metal structure that looked far from welcoming. Baal was swept along with it, still struggling to understand what was happening as he saw driven forward with both his brother and sisters as well as some he didn't even know.

Once they were driven outside, they encountered a man waiting, standing in a grander uniform compared to his fellows, grey and lacking in the armor plating that accompanied the other man's black plain shirt. Under a grey cap on his head, the man's hair looked almost departed, and his dark almost black eyes stared into them that frightened Baal way more than the one who had beaten him with the baton.

"Recruits! Form column! Ten by five!" this new man shouted to them, and they all began to stumble into the formation. This reminded Baal of the game the Guardians had played with them, seeing how fast they all could form different shapes. No doubt his siblings remembered, but they were all still so panicked and shocked, they stumbled amongst each other.

>"Come on! Didn't they teach you to count in the test tube?" the man shouted again, his features forming into a scowl. Whatever as meant by that, Baal couldn't understand that either.<p>

Eventually, they managed to walk into a loose rectangle, ten in each row of five. The leader man dropped his scowl, and nodded, glancing down at his watch to possibly check how long they'd taken. Baal knew in this case, smaller numbers were better.

As he did that, Baal glanced among the column. He saw his nine other siblings, all looking as stunned as the rest. He was familiar with some that weren't his siblings, though he couldn't recall their names, though they knew of him as he knew them. As they all became more aware, the column grew tighter as they began to huddle together. This was met by more hostile expressions and another instructor moving amongst them with his stun baton, prodding them back into the loose flock.

"Did I give you permission to break formation, recruits?" one the lesser instructors shouted at them, giving a girl that Baal didn't know a hard whack on the shoulder with the stun baton.  
>"No? Then hold your formation!"<p>

Baal groaned, his body beginning to grow sore from the shocks. He continued to stand on his feet, though, as did they all. The leader man had stopped looking at his watch now, and was tapping his own baton against his hand, as if impatient for something. Baal certainly hoped it wasn't them.

He thought he could hear more people shouting at them, but he realized the voices were far off, only getting closer now. The chatter was familiar, more instructions to 'maintain formation'. Around the corner of a wall, came more recruits led by instructors. But only a few of them didn't make Baal stare in shock.

They also stood in the same formation, fifty strong each. They were aliens, of all different kinds. They all glared at each other, pretty

much confirming they were all as shocked as each other. Only the bird like ones, with spiky heads, managed to keep a perfect formation.

>There were others. One's that had weird mouths. There were ones with four eyes, that glanced at everything has nervously as they did. There was another group Baal spotted that looking alike to himself and his siblings, hanging around with the many eyed aliens as well as these other, shorter skinnier weird ones who reminded Baal of creatures found near the water. Standing in a column between the water creatures and the ones with many eyes, there must have only been under two rows of them, but they looked similar to himself and his siblings, only a bit shorter. Asides from them, there were others who Baal first thought might be alike to them, but had strange feet and three fingers, as well as having their faces obscured by masks.<p>

"All recruits!" the head instructor began to shout again. "Form up! Continue the march! Alpha Group, that means you kids," the man stared in their direction, "join your column to the end of the larger formation! Move now!"

They all dropped their stares at the aliens for the moment, to get moving. The other columns stumbled by, and together, Baal followed the rest as they tried to move without breaking their shape, to be walking behind the aliens. As they moved, Baal was pushed between rows as they walked. Eventually, all 'recruits' were marching in a single line of their separated columns of fifty.

"Columns! Begin march, double time!" the head instructor shouted at them, and Baal believed he could hear the voice repeated, but speaking different words. What was that?

\_TI37-MIGTU (Military Intelligence Grade Translation Unit)\_

Baal shook his head, not knowing what was happening. The voice in his mind, his voice, reminded him of things he couldn't remember himself. It was disconcerting, as well as frightening, when it called.

He hid it though, and began to jog as they were all forced to pick up pace. They all seemed to hold it well enough, though one of the masked creatures tumbled over and fell onto the dusty track they were marched down. She quickly stumbled back to her feet and sprinted to catch up with the rest of her column, looking terrified.

Baal constantly glared at his surroundings, trying to ignore the weird creatures before him. At first, they were simply moving through a lot of structures that looked alike to the one he woke up in, the barracks. If all of them came from here, then there could be four barracks, maybe five. To all of them, the structures looked cold, grey and very strange. Between the buildings, only dirt paths had been paved. All of the structures were surrounded by a tall concrete wall, that Baal couldn't get a glimpse of what was over it, with the exception of the sky.

What stunned them all however, was when they passed through a gate in this wall, and moved beyond the compound. The dirt paths continued, but amongst a natural forest, open grasslands and meadows. While his memories were still blurry, it reminded him of home.

>That wasn't what was shocking them all however. It was the grand structures, too simply amazing to be the craft of those who built the

metal structures they came from. Massive towers shot up from the fields, reaching into the sky. Blue energy pulsed up their sides, before a miniature blue ball of light was launched up into the sky to explode into millions of tiny blue specks of light that faded into the air before they came anywhere near the ground.<p>

It captured many of them in it's awe, the strange mouthed reptilian aliens having their four mandibles agape, more captivated by it than the rest.

"Keep moving!" the instructors continued to yell at them. They continued their forced march, and while Baal, nor any of his siblings seemed to fazed by it, he noticed that some of the others began to wheeze and and cough. They were still forced to keep jogging however, until even Baal found himself coughing out the dirt kicked up by the columns in front of them.

Eventually, after some time, they were allowed to stop, sit in the grass and have some water. He gulped down the water handed to him in a bottle, almost drinking till half way in his greed, until he saw one of his sister's; Ellie, sitting next to him and glaring at him. The water they were given was shared between three.

"You're not getting anymore!" Ellie wretched it from his hands and took some of the water herself. The boy sitting beside her, he didn't recognize by name, the boy being from a different family, waited for some water himself. He didn't look irritated, more simply exhausted beyond the point to even complain. Eventually, Ellie drank a quarter of the water and handed over the remaining quarter to the other boy. Baal stared at the ground, a little bit ashamed for his mistake. While Ellie might hold it against him later, it didn't look like the other boy seemed to care as he gulped down what remained.

"Sorry," Baal simply whispered, and Ellie shook her head.

"Sorry, doesn't bring back the water, greedy dog," Ellie whispered back at him. Of all his sisters, none outdid Ellie when it came to being harsh and mean. Baal simply looked away. He and his siblings, the other families, as well as these aliens and outsiders, were all here, and for what? The grey haired lady's speech was all that remained in his mind. While he didn't understand some of it, he knew what he had been told.

>They were here to train and become stronger. Some wanted that more than others. For Baal, it was everything he'd spent his life being prepared for. To become strong.<p>

"All of you! On your feet!" the leader came back again, the rest now apparently over. He twirled the stun baton in his hand as he waited for them all to rise.

>"Every single one of you! Assemble in a single column, five in each row! You cannot be standing in a row with anyone that was in your column on the march here!" he shouted the new instructions.<p>

Baal paused, as did many of them. That meant he'd be standing in a row with none of his own, with the aliens and possibly outsiders. As the stun batons crackled, they moved anyway. Baal stumbled in somewhere behind Ellie, in a row somewhere in the middle. The column was pretty loose, as none of them had any particular desire to be close to each other.

He turned his head and found himself staring into the beady black eyes of one of the four mandible creatures, it staring back into his just as alienated. It breathed a heavy huff in his face, and Baal stepped back in disgust as a mist of saliva hit him.

"Ewww..." one of Baal's brothers; Xev, commented as he stood behind them. Baal shook his head, and swiped the saliva off his face. The alien simply seemed to form something that was a mockery of a human grin, before tuning its attention away.

He looked further down the row. He saw one of the spiky heads, who unlike the rest, wasn't studying those around him, but keeping his gaze straight forward. The weird mouthed alien attempted to get a gaze into him, breathing a gust of misty saliva his way too, but the spiky head didn't even react to that either. Could he even turn his neck?

Then there was one of those strange helmeted aliens with three fingers. He recognized it as the one that had fell into the dust earlier on the jog here. The suit she wore all over her body, obscuring any trace of skin, seemed to still be covered in the dirt, brown specks covering the hood over her head. She brushed them away nervously, seeming far more panicked than the rest of her group, who all seemed to stand around clueless and gazing off into the sky.

Finally, on the end of the row, which was hard to see from Baal's opposite end, was an outsider, a girl. She looked way smaller than any of his siblings, tiny compared to another of the spiky heads who was standing behind her. She stood with her arms folded, and glaring at everyone around her too. There didn't really seem anything interesting about her. She certainly wasn't one of them.

"You standing with someone you don't like? Tough luck! Those within your row, are now your team for today's exercise, and probably beyond," the head instructor told them. None of them were brave enough to protest that, no matter how much they would have usually complained. The man smacked his baton into his open palm.  
>"You indeed shall work together! Because if you don't, you can all share some quality team bonding time starving together! Orders handed down to me, instruct, that the last team to finish today's exercise, shall not get a single bite of anything! Do you hear me, recruits? That means, if you lose, no food!"<p>

That was pretty much well understood in all of them. Baal took another gaze of his now team. They didn't appear to be winning material, though no more than the rest of the teams that stood in front and behind them. He could hear his brother Xev groan in irritation.

"You shall now receive a squad designation! Beginning from the front!" the instructor told them as he walked beside the first row. For each name he called, he stepped forward another row to make things clear.

>"Predator, Hornet, Vindicator, Phaeston, Locust, Avenger,-" the man finally reached Baal. "Tempest, Javelin, Claymore-"<p>

\_Squad Tempest. Got it.\_

Baal glanced down the row again. The spiky head had actually turned

himself side ward to look in their direction, but only to continue gazing towards the instructor. Behind him, Xev repeated his own squad name aloud as if to get use to the word.

"Squad Javeel-" Xev stumbled on pronouncing it. "Squad Javelin."

"Now, you shall have your squad designation! Remember it well, because you'll have to call it when you cross the finishing line. Don't want to forget what's needed to win, right?" they were all told by the head instructor. Finishing line? This was a race? Baal knew he was fast, at least enough to almost outrace most of his siblings, but how could he know if these aliens were faster?

"Your task, will be to move into the nearby area, seek out a bell in this area behind me-" the man pointed his thumb back to the forest behind him, "and every team member is required to ring it, before getting back here!" they were finally told. "Simple enough? Right, recruits!? Right?"

It was the first time he'd actually heard anything spoken from the aliens or outsiders. They all responded clumsily and out of sync. The weird mouthed alien beside him shouted something he couldn't understand, but seconds later, he could. Translation.

"Right!" a dozen voices responded, including Baal's and all of his siblings. The man gave them all a look of scorn, before nodding.

"Then it begins. Now! Go! Go! Get moving to those bells!" The man shouted, and Baal already found himself shoved aside.

There wasn't any coordination, for certain. He was actually thankful that his brother Xev shoved him out of the column entirely, because everyone raced forward into each other, some individuals not even beginning to move yet. There was shouting as they all shoved passed each other to beginning rushing forward to the forest.

Baal stumbled, and finally began running behind them. He glanced around the racing horde, managing to spot those he'd stood in the row with. They didn't look like they wanted to cooperate. Both the spiky head as well as the weird mouth, and also the small girl, had all raced forward, with the last member of the team barely managing to keep up behind them, the masked girl seeming to continue coughing as she stumbled behind them.

They all simply raced forward, and Baal had no idea but to follow them.

\* \* \*

><p>"No team cooperation first time around is expected, as always," Halsey shuffled the papers in front of her, written reports from the Spartan III program about the training on Onyx. She had taken some glances at it. It was definitely more than she would have expected, the training mostly copy and pasted from the Spartan II program until Kurt had taken and improved it, to focus more on training willing recruits against alien targets.<p>

It couldn't be applied here, but it did give a lot of valuable

insight when dealing with subjects with no proper psychological report beyond confirmation of their will to fight.

"That's the way they are naturally," Ananke told her, shrugging, "something shared among all species. Always look out for number one, the self."

"It's natural yes, but overtime, it can be removed to a certain extent," Halsey responded, glancing down at another folder that sat of her desk, a compilation of all her Spartan II work, including weekly reports. Looking back on the notes always seemed to be convincing enough to regenerate the spirit. Something could be done.

She continued to study the view screens with interest, watching all the subjects tumble over each other, searching for some blasted bit of noisy metal. There were multiple bells to accommodate the larger group, which had all been either hidden, or protected behind a wall of significant obstacles. Eventually, the subjects would be able to reach at least one of them.

"Some have group values to an extent..." Ananke commented as she watched a particular screen through the eyes of her virtual form. Halsey spotted a Quarian who had fallen over tripping on a rock, and another stopped to help, grabbing the other boy's hand and lifting him back to his feet. Valuable time that could have been spent racing ahead, was instead used to help another, outside of the team. Maybe their kind did have some good social values, but that was pointless to the exercise if only a handful helped others.

She glanced around the other screens, watching the chaos roll on. They'd get to the bells, ring them and get back. Ultimately, there would be one individual who'd come back last, take the blame, and lose it for their team. That team would starve as a result.  
>That was when the real team building began.<p>

It would hopefully be built upward. Exercises were built with the purpose of encouraging and rewarding cooperative behavior. Teams that worked together, would preform better. The losing team would be faced with either undertaking it together, or starving. Most of the time, they chose the first option.

Simple enough strategy.

"We'll get the results we want, one way or another," Halsey commented, changing the com screen to another camera point. The scuffle to reach the bell on the third pole had already begun. Others were still milling about, desperately trying to find another bell.

"It's forging them as a team that's the problem," Ananke told her. "I theorized the difficulty of getting them to work together is communication. While with all the installed translators, language is hardly a problem, it's the initiation of that communication which is the problem. Most people have a problem talking with a reptile much larger than them, I suppose."

"They'll learn to communicate eventually," Halsey reassured her. "That's your role, right?"

"Indeed," Ananke replied, nodding. "The devised modified curriculum should get some communication flowing. I've decided to do bits and pierces of different species's history, all of them obviously including particular military actions we can learn from. Sangheili-San'Shyuun War, Covenant Wars, Reaper Wars, Unification... list goes on," Ananke told her, before slyly adding: "Morning War is my favorite."

"Funny, Ann," Halsey answered, knowing the AI liked the cruel humor. "Some notable military actions, but nothing really to teach them?"

"You're right about that," Ananke still smiled. "A lot of Luddites bashing tech they don't understand."

"You've modified the curriculum? No Thermopylae?" Halsey questioned, pretending to be sadden as she toyed with Ananke. "It's the classic."

"Of course, Thermopylae," Ananke replied, folding her arms. "What do you think I was going to teach them on the first day? Wolves?"

"Let's not get off task, here," Halsey replied, flicking over to another camera view. She spotted a subject; one of the clone children, clambering up bell post two, grasping at the tiny handholds. Determination at least, but not the work of any team effort. The girl's fellow trainees still milled about, unable to match the feat and also not able to find a way themselves.

The recruit finally reached the top of the post, reaching up to grasp the bell's chain and ringing it. Halsey glanced to the screen beside it, where Ananke brought up a subject report. Ellie V-029. As a small surprise, it was the same girl Halsey remembered seeing in the Containment Labs, hazel haired and blue eyed. All notes made thus far pointed to the girl being an above average subject.

Halsey continued to watch as she slowly herself slid down the pole, landing at the bottom amongst a crowd of subjects. They all crowded around, glaring up at the pole and wondering if they could replicate the same tactic. A Bartarian was the next to take up the challenge, quickly grasping on and pulling himself upward. A few others joined in, but they only got in the way of each other.

Ananke shook her head as the subjects began to take off to the finish line, with their team mates still hanging around with the task unfinished. Team Locust had a majority of its members over the line first, but that was all for naught as long as their last member dwindled behind. One of the memory wiped Quarian's simply still hung around at the base of one of the bell's, unable to climb it or do anything for that matter. For a while, he stood around hopelessly, and Ananke sighed.

The exercise continued, with the last remaining subjects finally retreating from the forest and reaching the finishing line. Each team stood on the edge of it, not knowing if someone in their team was going to be the last one to cross. Finally, nearly every subject was accounted for, save one. Halsey watched the dread and disappointment on Ananke's face as the instructors had to move into the forests, to find that Quarian boy still sitting at the foot of one of the posts.



They took a bit of pity, and didn't hit him with the stun sticks, but being dragged back humiliated was bad enough.

It was Team Locust that would be the first team to have the consequences of failure. Halsey fiddled with her pen, clicking it in and out repeatedly as she watched Tammerson round them all up and shout at them all. It was what as required, after all.

"I must go to my facilities, now," Ananke turned around to face Halsey, "Tammerson shall arrive soon as he's finished yelling at them. Good day, Doctor Halsey."

"Good day, Ann," Halsey answered, nodding. Ananke's avatar simply disintegrated into dust and was washed away by an a virtual wind.

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><p><em><strong>Author's Afterward:<br>\*\*\_

\*\*The first of the Spartan V Chapters. It's the beginning of something, certainly. I considered dropping the conversation at the beginning of the chapter, but I decided it was necessary for a few reasons. Mainly, just to draw a few parallel universe comprehensions, further characterization as well as introduce Osman at least, for the sake of the plot further down the line (more on that later!)>This chapter served to introduce the beginning of the program. I've kind of saved the inter-species conflict, and team unity stuff for later, next chapter.<br>\*\*

\*\* But there is things elsewhere, I must address three other things.

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\*\*On the Shepard-Leviathan alliance, I wouldn't say it's for the best either, nor are the Leviathans meant to be anywhere near a force of good in this story. It's great that fans of the series can criticize it.><strong>

\*\*On the ONI being seen as an apparent villain, I'd say, after reading the Thursday War, that it would be out of character for ONI to do anything else. While ONI is no Cerberus (ME3 Cerberus = crazy evil with no purpose), they do have no restrictions, and are very powerful in the UNSC structure. While the UNSC might not be necessarily be that bad a government, ONI certainly doesn't help.

>While at some point in the story, we may see ONI as an opposing force from some certain points of view, be antagonized, doesn't mean that they are simply evil. Most of the Haloverse already considers ONI to be 'just evil' in their eyes, but that's just opinions, that doesn't take away from what they are, and what they do: make the hard choices nobody else can do.<br>\*\*

\*\* At no point, I promise you, will this story have devolved into Mass Effect (Good!) vs Halo (Bad). No predictable plot emergence, such as 'Leviathans/random evil, let us unite and put our differences aside!' that you would expect either. Or, a typical Citadel-UNSC/ONI war, and such. Leading on from plot...><strong>

**\*\*I've finally finished writing Kin From The Stars overall plot layout, the entire overarching plot from prologue to finale. May I say, I am impressed what I produced overall. I don't usually like to write out my ideas for Fan Fictions, but this was just required it.**

>If I keep up my usual schedule of releasing a chapter a week, taking away weeks when I may miss an update and adding those when I may produce multiple chapters. **I'll probably finish this in two years :)<br>**There are one hundred and eight chapters planned, split across three acts in three books. Grand story indeed. **\*\***

>**<strong>**

**\*\*\*PS: Fixed the glitch, when I updated Chapter 2, I instead replaced it with Prologue III :) Chapter 2 has returned.**

>**<strong>\*\***

## 7. IV - Internal Disagreements

**\*\*Chapter IV: Internal Disagreements**

>**<strong>**

**\* \* \***

><p>**<strong><strong><em><strong>"<em>ONI couldn't move in a straight line even if you put it on rails" - Vaz Beloi, Orbital Drop Shock Trooper<em>\*\_\*\*\*\***

**\* \* \***

><p>"Formation Bravo, fire Shiva missile at marked Dreadnought," Rear Admiral Curtyn announced dryly, scrutinizing the battle before him. Three Destroyers, plus six Frigates against an overwhelming force consisting of two Turian Dreadnoughts, four Cruisers and nine Frigates. Hardly an even fight, but they'd show the birds that they were outgunned by a mile.<p>

The UNSC Patricia unleashed a single Shiva warhead, launched on a straight path to the Turian Dreadnought trying to flank around their formation. Before it could hit however, the Dreadnought's GUARDIAN system neutralized the Shiva, the nuclear warhead detonating harmlessly in the emptiness of space instead of blowing that damn ship apart. Nuclear had too much flare, and was easily detected and dispatched by those advanced counter systems. Curtyn nodded with his assessment, and panned his change of tactics.

>On the left flank of his flagship, he could see the Frigate *Tenacious* explode into a fireball as the Turians focused fire and brought down its shields, slamming mass driver after mass driver shot into the vessel. He didn't have much time left to working things out.

"All frigates! Launch all Archer missiles at designated targets! Follow up with a MAC round!" the Rear Admiral shouted. The UNSC fleet responded, unleashing a hailstorm of missiles from every ship. Obviously overwhelmed by the sheer numbers, a deadly amount of Archers made it through to crack those kinetic barriers of theirs, and leave them open for the finishing.

The \_Alexandre's \_duel MAC canons fired, the Destroyer driving two clean holes through one of the two Turian Dreadnoughts. It was enough to cause critical damage, the ship slowing to a halt and began drifting. The second Dreadnought pulled back to avoid the same fate, but not before it got one of it's wing's clipped by a near miss.

\_Take that birdie. There's a lot more were that came from.\_

Curtyn leaned heavily against the holographic display table, a smile playing across his face for the first time today. Further MAC strikes were gutting Turian Frigates and Cruisers left and right. While only fifty percent of his own battle force remained, they had eliminated a highly important enemy asset. As all Intel suggested, the Hierarchy couldn't just replace a Dreadnought, not easily that is.

"All ships! Fire at will! Take as many as you can!" He shouted his new commands, watching as the second Dreadnought disappeared into FTL, and its few remaining supporting Cruisers and Frigates followed it, most likely only a strategic retreat. They'd be back.

The Alexandre was the only Destroyer still standing, and two fully operational Frigates. The rest were space junk or in the case of one Frigate, crippled.

Those nuclear mines planted before the battle had taken an enemy cruiser, plus two frigates. The fleet engagement has claimed double that. The UNSC's superior weapons technology had won the day in straight up fight. While the birds would likely return with reinforcements, hit them again with more numbers, and eventually seize the colony, but today was a victory none the less.

"Admirals?" A voice sounded beside him. On the other side of the table, Vice Admiral Rich hit the holograms with his hand twice, signalling for the Dumb AI to pause the simulation.

"Captain Lasky, good that you join us," the Vice Admiral gave the first greeting, informal. The captain of the UNSC Infinity saluted both officers. Curtyn simply nodded, gesturing for him to be at ease.

"I hope I didn't interrupt the-", Lasky paused for a second, glancing down at the holograms on the table. While he obviously recognized the UNSC warships, he glared at the Turian vessels. To him, it most likely looked like they were misusing UNSC equipment to play some ridiculous strategy game. He ignored it, continuing.

>"-the fleet simulations, sirs, but I came as soon as the orders came through."<p>

"Don't worry, it was just a trivial exercise," Curtyn responded, nodding to Rich. "Practicing some unusual scenarios, a little brain exercise, if you will."

"An interesting way to spend time," Lasky nodded, walking closer to the table, inspecting the detail of the holographic wrecks that hung above a nameless colony world. Rich tapped his side of the display and closed the simulation before the Captain got a more closer look on the Turian vessels. He'd dismiss them as fictional creations to represent unknown alien forces, but in case the Infinity ever did see a Turian vessel in the future, it was best the Captain did not make

that connection.

"It's good to see you here, Captain," Rich stepped forward, pushing the thought of the simulation aside. "I trust the Infinity's latest hunt was successful as ever?"

"I'm afraid not, Admiral," Lasky replied, "We uncovered a few more sets of coordinates on possible Forerunner installations, but they were marked in hazardous space. The orders handed down from Fleet was not to pursue them."

"They're not worth what they once were, anyway," Rich simply told him, strolling back over to the holographic projector. He waved the dumb AI to open an access console in front of him. He typed rapidly into the keyboard.

>"We know everything possible about the Forerunners, now. That's why we're moving into putting that all knowledge into practice."<p>

"Sir?" Lasky questioned, curious.

"Consider this an official briefing. The Infinity is getting pulled from the search for further artifact locations," Rich told him, opening up a hologram of a stellar location, a great asteroid field surrounded by massive swirls of free floating dirt. It looked like a planet had broken up and left nothing but a strew of rocky debris.

>"As unexciting as it may seem, Captain, ONI has gotten Fleet's approval to assign Infinity to assisting efforts in this stellar location," Rich explained, tapping a few more commands. A simulated construction began, of some kind of massive object, obscured by the great fields of dust.<p>

"May I speak freely, Admiral?" Lasky questioned.

"Granted, Captain," Rich nodded.

"It's a mighty big damn waste of resources to assign the Infinity to guard duty. While we might not be the most advanced ship in the fleet anymore, we're still the biggest and most heavily armed," Lasky voiced his doubts.

"It's not a permanent position," Rich dismissed his worries. "Nor will you hang around often. As you said, the Infinity is the largest ship in the UNSC fleet. The assembly of this space station here is another game changer we've got planned, using all that Forerunner tech we salvaged."

"The thing will be built piece by piece, then all you'll have to do is drag it in system," Curtyn explained. "pieces are around half a kilometer square big themselves, and acquiring all the tugs required to pull that mass, we'd get some unwanted attention."

"Obviously, this won't be a very long mission?" Lasky questioned and assumed.

"Moving that stuff carefully from the Ort Cloud to its destination will take a few weeks. We plan to ship it piece by piece, year by year. Between that, the Infinity will be placed on a various number of ops, but never taking it beyond the boundaries of UNSC space,"

Rich explained. "Altogether... might be a couple of decades."

"I understand, sir," Lasky nodded.

"We'll send the finer details to the Infinity's AI," Rich tapped his hands against the table's edge, turning off the device. "It's all very simplistic stuff, but our ever alert leader would like us to keep this construction off the radar. No one aboard the Infinity beyond you shall ever know of the true nature of just what we've doing."

"As far as the crew should be concerned, all your hauling is big chunks of metal," Rear Admiral Curtyn explained. "While we don't ever doubt your loyalties, an effort like this requires absolute minimal knowledge from the outside, much like the Infinity's own construction."

"I'll do my best to keep it classified, sir."

"Good, good," Rich nodded, stepping back to face Lasky. "In the meanwhile, you should enjoy your shore leave. Don't get to see Earth, much, huh?"

"That what be correct, Admiral," Lasky agreed.

"Dismissed, Captain," Rich waved the Captain away, turning back to the table. As Lasky left, Curtyn allowed his disappointment to show.

"What I wouldn't give to be back in the wooden-top navy, even on a dead boring task like that," Curtyn told him as he grasped the mug of coffee beside him, taking a swig of it.

"You'd regret it," Rich told him, picking up a folder beside the table, and withdrew a data chip. "Cease the battle simulation, system. Scrub all local records. Wouldn't want anyone else to take a really close look at this stuff."

"Affirmative Vice Admiral," the pleasant voice of some dumb AI responded back, erasing everything that had been undertaken here. In the future, Rich would be sure to see one of these high tech fleet simulations placed in a secure ONI center for enemy assessments, and out of the prying eyes of the Fleet. The smart AI here knew that any discussion between ONI personnel, whether it be top secret intelligence or the day's weather, was to be filtered out and not even recorded.

"One thing that simulation was missing," Curtyn voiced between sipping the coffee in his hands. Rich easily guessed it, but didn't voice it until he turned and surveyed the entire room was empty, their conversation not going to be overheard.

"The actual mindset of a Turian fleet commander," Rich nodded, taking his seat. "AI's mimicking their tactics, behavior and procedure is one thing, the actual real deal is another."

"You're right, there," Curtyn nodded in agreement, finishing the coffee and placing the mug down. "Simulations or no simulations, we, and our commanders, will still have no idea how a Turian; or any other of these alien bunch, think."

"That's the study group to work out," Rich pointed out, "and Halsey's V Program has given us quite some insight to real behavior one cannot simply gather from a source as unreliable as an open network."

"Children's behavior," Curtyn snorted. "The damn entire program is a big risk... and the payoff is too far away in my opinion. It will be a decade until they will be operational, and in that time, we could have amassed a significant proxy presence in the Systems Alliance for the same effort."

"Infiltrating a bloated coalition of bureaucrats routinely crushed under the heel of public opinion is one thing," Rich acknowledged, "but infiltrating deep into alien space, it's very heart, is another entirely, which can only be accomplished by one who looks like them, and is capable of easily mixing among the natives."

"You may be right," Curtyn nodded in agreement, "but bringing back Halsey was another gamble. She'll only be useful for a time you know. As soon as your finished training them, I more than recommend that we request CINCONI dispose of her for good. The last thing we need is another incident like last time."

"You discount possibilities of success," Rich replied, confidently clasping his hands together. "While I do have no illusions that it's a plan that can't go wrong, I do however, see the potential in continuing to train a second, even beyond that, multiple generations of such agents. Using non-human infiltrators placed in foreign territory could become a major function of ONI for intelligence gathering."

At that Curtyn simply scorned. He liked the idea of old fashion stealth warfare, sneaking through the vast blackness of space, hitting the enemy from the distance. Operating through agents infiltrating foreign and possibly hostile territory seemed too... risky and disastrous in case anything went wrong.

"This could go wrong in a hundred different ways, and I won't even question the flaws outlined in your subject selection," Curtyn rose to his feet, quite ready to leave. "But I warn you again about Halsey. If you want another generation, simply select out a subject as the new program head, improve upon the training structure, like the Spartan III program."

"Ackerson had no idea what he was doing," Rich commented, still seated. "By now, you've obviously seen the orders handed down by Parangosky?"

"Foolish, but she doesn't make mistakes," Curtyn replied, his old crinkled face forming a deep frown. "Still, we've got the resources to pull the Infinity back to guard duty within the borders, yet we don't have it to simply cyro three hundred or so Spartans for a duration until we have need of them? Trust me, Ned, there's something else in this."

Rich didn't show any negative emotion, simply going an accepting nod. He then switched to codewords for the ONI AI that was probably monitoring them, unbeknownst to all others in the system. He checked his watch; a good old fashion analog cloak, and noted that the little

hand had passed three. It was time to progress their conversation to another location.

"I accept our Admiral's judgement," Rich told him, standing up. He then dropped it among some chatter. "It's time we should be going. I have much to attend to elsewhere, back at Zero and all."

Time to go elsewhere

"I'll see you tomorrow then," Curtyn took the coffee cup off the table's edge. "The lab coats want to show off where all the tech we stole went."

It didn't suspicious at all, seeing his office was located in Zero Complex in ONI's scattered sites in Sydney. Back at Zero however, was a codeword his fellow conspirator would recognize instantly however. Curtyn only gave a nod, and Rich picked up a data chip off the desk and they left Fleetcom's Central Administration building as unnoticed as they arrived, going separate ways. They would regroup later however.

It was convenient that all the street cameras and various surveillance devices that the local government possessed; and therefore accessible to ONI, were disabled today as an urgent security update was installed to counter a recent breach by possible Insurrectionist hackers, giving Rich and a number of other individuals the invisibility they would need, off the wide array of surveillance completely. Usually, they could meet inside any ONI facility, but since an infiltrating AI was detected inside of the network, they could take no chances.

He'd stopped in a rather rundown public bathroom; where no monitoring devices were be installed, to swap from his plain uniform to a civilian attire, doing his best to not look anything that an keen eyed spy would recognize. Even though it was extremely unlikely they were being observed by the very organization they headed, they couldn't take any chances with someone as ruthless and paranoid as Admiral Parangosky.

Swapping into something that would look like a low ranking white collar worker, IT; the city was crawling with that, or something similar. Deeming his appearance well deviated from what anyone familiar with him would recognize as Vice Admiral Ned Rich, he continued on his way. The stereotypical paranoia of a spook constantly nagged him to look over his shoulder and look for anyone who'd been behind him far too long. For all he could know, just the average fly in the air could be some kind of surveillance drone.

Extreme paranoia. The crucial qualification of any ONI personnel.

Quite happy with his disguise, perhaps feeling a tiny nostalgic to his previous field experience, he continued. It wasn't a far walk from a Mag-Train system, which took him far out beyond the urban condensation of the city itself into the surrounding light industrial areas.

Finding the rendezvous point, he passed through the security systems common amongst a small office among the industrial areas like this,

and entered. Passed an abandoned reception, he met his comrade who summoned him here in the morning with only the instruction to bring Curtyn along as well. Rich alone was the only one in Section III who received communications to gather at meeting points.

"Good to see you made it," a tanned skinned man stepped forward and shook Rich's hand. He nodded.

"Good to see we are addressing the issues at hand," Rich replied.

"Curtyn arrived before you. We're all here," Jason Gratson told him, gesturing to the door that led to a conference room deep inside the building, windowless and also happened to be sound proofed and completely secure. Only better security could be found in Odin's eye.

Inside, he found Rear Admiral Curtyn already having arrived, wearing a similar disguise though lacking the effort of Rich's own, perhaps why he had gotten here earlier. Asides from him, four other men who'd probably only give him aliases sat. They each gave him a respectful nod as he sat amongst them.

Behind him, Gratson sealed the door and the counter intrusion systems came into place. They were secure as they ever were going to be.

"This is relevant to the recent news, isn't it?" Curtyn immediately questioned. "The Spartan III shutdown?"

"Not taking the obvious lies as fact, no actual reason is given," one of the unnamed men threw some document; possibly the report, on the table. "Budget? No shortage. Public relations? There can't be civilian casualties by a unit that doesn't even exist technically. Moral and Ethics? Never been a concern. Loyalty?" the man left that one hanging, before tapping on the document in front of him, "that is the question."

"Hard to control, yes," Jason Gratson stepped forward, finally taking his own seat at the head, "but a valuable resource, and one that is loyal to the core as long there is targets; preferably non-human, to shoot. Possibilities for putting the company into stand by through Cyro storage was obviously overlooked. I want the reason why."

"For that..." one of Gratson's subordinates muttered, "we have no idea."

"I've heard nothing, even trying to squeeze some answers out, but no luck," Rich told them, folding his arms and placing them on the table. "Nobody's going to say a whisper."

"Then, were going to have to play hunches until we can get some better Intel," Gratson nodded, looking at a document he picked up in his hand. "Let's assume, for some reason, that our Admiral was simply clearing house of the embarrassment that was the Spartan III Program, for the numerous reasons, mainly to cover Section III's involvement. We have currently, and looming to the inevitable event in the future, of coming into contact with an alien alliance that makes the Covenant Empire look like a hobbyist club, and our leadership... is throwing valuable experienced soldiers away?"



"In favor of weapons like Infinity," Curtyn commented, "for all the collection of big guns, we'll always need to fight the ground wars. Spartan IV's are sufficient enough these days, but we would need every experienced trooper in the fight if it ever came to it."

"Just another show of Parangosky's continued failures," Gratson gave the conference table a heavy smack with his hand. "I have reviewed all reports of Gamma Company, and have decided that once again, we're been taken in the wrong direction. I do believe it is time to do something more than chalk this up to the list?"

With that suggestion, Rich glanced among the group. Each of them mirrored his own, searching among their tight ranks for one who would look nervous at a time like this, to purge that weakness. He himself looked confident, while Curtyn was his usual stone faced self.

"Launching a conflicting order?" another no-name questioned.

"Correct," Gratson nodded, pointing down to the document sitting on the table in front of him. "I have prepared orders for one of our AI's to hand over to the Company Commander. After studying the upcoming operation, I've decided to change some directives."

"What I read," one man asked, "is that the Commander in charge is already aware of CINCONI pulling the plug. What if the Spartan decides to hand our AI's instructions off to an agent?"

"You're foolish to assume their that machine like," Gratson answered. "Dedicated and loyal, but willing to take whatever legitimate course of action possible to save their fellows. Whatever real leader would do anything else? Our authority outweighs that of already standing orders, anyway."

"As soon as ONI's agent gets back to them however, he'll see the ordered purge through," Curtyn stated. "If you are going to save these Spartans, you'll need them to go beyond UNSC jurisdiction, beyond the reach of ONI altogether. To do that they'd need to go rogue," Curtyn withdrew back from the table, shaking his head. "I'm all for saving them, but I don't want to see honorable UNSC personnel getting hurt in the process."

"We've been blessed with luck, to avoid such things," Gratson told them, "our former comrade, Agent Thompson Gilerson, is currently on the colony of New Brandenburg with rebel forces. With the Intel he's supplied them; dangerous Intel, they are currently preparing to launch a Rubble alike exodus operation, on a lesser scale, towards what they assume is some kind of Human space not under the control of the UNSC; actually as matter of fact: System's Alliance space, so they are on the run to perceived freedom... unfortunately for them, ONI drones in orbit will make that escape impossible. Fortunately for us, however, the Spartans will be launched in an operation to completely destroy such vessel. Our modifications to the fleet's orders, will see the ship captured instead of destroyed, allowing a mode of transport."

"Risky as always... but impressive," Curtyn agreed. "Though it disturbs me more than rebels have gained access to Intel about the

existence of Citadel Space."

"All that they received was the coordinates for a single system and promise of a haven," Gratson assured him, "on the other side of the galaxy. That's why they need such a transport, to make what's probably for them, a decade long journey. Thankfully, Gilerson; always the moral champion, threw the lot in with our old associate Max Shawn... the classic heroic revolutionary leader," Gratson snorted with the obvious sarcasm.

"Good," Rich nodded, knowing how Brandenburg Liberation Army would deal with this. They were one of the few righteous bunch that thought other innies gave the cause of independent rule a bad reputation. They wouldn't share Intel with the likes of the United Rebel Front or any other bunch of terrorists.  
>"Less clean up required."<p>

"Parangosky is determined, to see New Brandenburg colony; only a collective eighty thousand, purged however... the Liberation Army seems to have come into the acquisition of non-existent WMD's," one of the agent's across the table nodded. "Not like that Intel is worth anything. As far as anyone else is concerned, all leaked knowledge of non-UNSC controlled Human space's existence will be rejected as ridiculous conspiracy theories, with no real proof to back it up."

"We'll easily see this done, then," Rich nodded in agreement.  
"Silence the leaks, back-stab Parangosky's efforts and save some Spartans in a single operation? Sounds more than agreeable."

"As always, your permission to undertake necessary action," Gratson slid a document over to Rich. He signed it with the pen clipped to his shirt, and passed it to Curtyn, who hesitated for a second, before placing his name alongside his co-conspirator. They passed it back to the Director.

He looked at it, and nodded, motioning for the agent beside him to hand him something.

Taking a seal, he placed the paper on the desk.

"Necessary action, authorized by senior command, for the better good of the UNSC."

Gratson stamped the document with the seal of the Office of Naval Intelligence, Section Zero.

\* \* \*

><p>Rich reclined back in his chair, gazing over the papers in front of him. Half of them were from Trevelyan facilities, reports on both technological findings as well as detailed week by week summaries by Ananke on the V Program's progress. He made a bad habit of only reading the summaries of these documents, tossing them into a pile to either be vaporized or sealed in proper security.<p>

In his hand right now, a paper handed to him by Gratson was the new orders he wanted passed onto Gamma Company's commander. Sending it by an AI employed by Section Zero or an official document would obviously pass it by a various ONI monitor, Human or AI, who would flag it. He

however, was apart of Section III, recruited in the investigation. As far as he knew, nobody at ONI knew he even had met Gratson; Director of Internal Investigations.

His access to a wide range of AI's was also why he'd send this message. With the Intel they'd managed to extract from the spy AI on Trevelyan was that it was the only monitoring AI that Parangosky had placed within the Shield World. With that, it meant that choosing an AI from the many there would guarantee the best security. Rich shook his head as he scanned the document.

\_The fate of our entire species is constantly at risk and here we are, spying and back stabbing each other. \_

It was justified though. Section Zero had led an investigation against the CINCONI for nine years now, for various charges from corruption all the way up to war crimes and treason. While the Section could never present such findings and make the investigation public; not until they managed to acquire a piece of absolutely condemning evidence, and even then, it would be a hard struggle to have the head of the Office of Naval Intelligence removed; something never achieved before in the history of the UNSC. For now, Internal Investigations had decided to best deal with every problem as they arose, and counter them.

One problem at a time, that was the way it happened today. Despite a long career working under Parangosky, he harbored no respect for her or even approval of the current state of ONI. While there was a need for necessary evils, such as the Spartan Program, the way in which Parangosky manipulated with the post-war politics, and even gambled with the UNSC's security was a step too far. This latest travesty of massive proportions was too much to just stand by and not join in the murmur of discontent.

He finished scanning in the document to an encryption device which only a handful of his AI's and personnel possessed the decryption keys. It would make the document secure enough to pass on through the ONI network. Of which AI to pass it onto...

He easily chose Ananke. Writing reports, dealing with Halsey and watching the everyday goings on the ONI controlled Shield World of Trevelyan barely consumed a tiny fraction of the seventh gen AI's processing potential. A splinter could easily be detached to pass on Section Zero's new orders and nobody would notice the difference. On top of that, the channels which the Spartan Branch's AI's utilized was probably the least monitored.

Typing into the keyboard, he quickly arranged for the encrypted orders to be passed on, writing his own set of instructions for their delivery.

As soon as it was reported back to Parangosky that the orders had been tampered with, suspensions would immediately fall upon those who had the ability to do such things. Section Zero was made up of many different cells, and by protocol, was the opposite of transparent to even the highest ranking ONI brass. While they couldn't be implicated, it would bring more suspicion upon them. Still, Gratson thought it was worth it to preserve an asset as important as a company worth of Spartans.

It was taking a risk, but a calculated one at that. The orders would be handed over, and all would go as Section Zero planned. Rich couldn't help shake the feeling that this may be one risk to many.

\* \* \*

><p>Preparation for their latest, and possibly last, mission were like any other, though it had the sinking feeling, knowing this was a thing you would never see again. During the trip through Slip Space on an ONI <em>Sorcerer<em> Class Assault Ship, the Ember Alight. An Assault Ship, as the Navy termed the armed troop carriers that carried ground forces between worlds, always had a tonnage between a Frigate and Destroyer, meant for the deployment of an entire brigade. Unlike a simple troop ship, it also could provide support with its fighter squadrons and fairly limited weapon systems. Shielding, once a dazzling alien mystery to every Human being when first seen utilized by the Covenant, was now standard gear fitted to each and every UNSC ship, new powerful generators built by the Engineer race that provided double the strength seen on the mightiest of Covenant warships.

An ONI Assault Ship however, was roughly the size of a Prowler, an infiltration and exfiltration craft meant for the deployment of special forces sizing anything between a platoon and a company, which was probably why all the Spartans of Gamma Company found the space quite tight. It was no Black Cat Prowler or the smaller Calypso exfiltration craft, but the Ember Alight would get them where they needed to go, and best of all: unseen. Weak enough shielding to be obliterated by a single torpedo of plasma however.

Currently, the Ember Alight was sitting in the Coorahae System, awaiting the UNSC battle-group that would accompany them to the colony of New Brandenburg, under the command of Vice Admiral Edison Varock . The world was a minor colony with a sparse rebel militia presence, though the Insurrectionists would however, launch a fleet of kamikaze ships to crash themselves into approaching warships, and buy the main force some time to escape the military's grasp.  
>As far as ONI was concerned, no rebel of this particular group of rebels could be allowed to live another day.<p>

So while the fleet was called together to stage a blockade of the small outer colony world, that left them simply docked with the outpost station, Lisbon. Kelly still couldn't figure out just why they were biding their time. The Innies weren't Covenant. They had sources and sympathizers on the inside, sources that would have obviously heard of the rallying of an entire battle-group. What was keeping them on the planet until the UNSC surrounded them?

The wait and lack of information was a slight frustration, compared to knowing the end of this operation would be a total betrayal of every soldier under her command. The Office of Naval Intelligence had crunched some numbers, decided that a bunch of psychotic suicide soldiers who just wouldn't die weren't worth the resources, and decided to simply rid of them to save some budget that was going to be spent repeating the same process elsewhere.  
>Thinking about something like that was best pushed aside, especially when orders from ONI were none of your business, but the mind simply didn't work like that. How would ONI rid themselves of a company of Spartans? Sure, Gamma Company were going to be dropped straight into a fortified Insurrectionist army, but only rarely were the rebels

coordinated enough to pose a challenge to Spartans. Currently, even the aliens were keeping their heads down; Brutes, Elites and the rest, and even then, there was no suicide mission in sight that ONI could spend them on.<p>

A lie would deal the end more likely. Perhaps ONI simply wanted Navy ships in orbit to begin an orbital bombardment while they were still present on the planet. Anyone in ONI could lie about needing to immediately dismantle some rebel weapon of mass destruction planet side, friendly fire be damned. They would have what they wanted, three hundred dead Spartan III's that technically never existed as well as not a single rebel left breathing.

Getting those thoughts out of her head wasn't as easy as thinking elsewhere. She had little things to think of, that wouldn't lead back to that same line of thought. Would Gamma's end come suddenly and unexpectedly? Or would she have to standby, while they were disposed? If ONI was designing a new Spartan program with the training regimes of the second generation, then why was the third program being disposed? Why also start the forth program in the first place if they were simply going to backtrack?

A lot of questions and no answers bothered everyone.

While she was mulling over the impending doom of the company, the rest were all unaware and continuing their normal procedure. Members of Gamma Company exercised, cleaned equipment and rested. As psychotic as Doctor Halsey once judged them to be, as well as now all of ONI, nothing about Gamma appeared to be wrong when they were off the battlefield. They drilled, prepared and presented themselves as any should expect from a Spartan. It was only when adrenaline fired up in combat, did some individuals get... out of hand.

Never the less, they were under her command, as they had once been under the command of Kurt... even a Spartan as well disciplined as him wouldn't have stood for this. He could have convinced them otherwise, nor would have let Gamma Company fall this far to begin with. She should had done more to improve company morale and discipline when she had the chance.

As the last few hours of preparations progressed, Kelly simply could not focus elsewhere, unable to reach any concluded thought. Why had this information been dispersed to begin with, especially to her? It felt like some kind of test, perhaps a solid proof that they; and unlike the IV's, were immune to disloyalty and treason, the most solid evidence they could ever give to justify a fifth generation program...

The musings were interrupted by a rapid series of clicking, as the holographic projector sitting nearby hummed to life. The Ember Light's dumb AI manifested, the avatar representing it simply just a series of slinging weights that drove each other in a never ending chain. It stooped it's clicking for a second, and it was replaced with a picture of an Earth like planet guarded by spear and shield. It wasn't the flash priority transmission icon; crossed lightening bolts, and Kelly didn't recognize just what the symbol was meant to represent.

Finally, it disappeared, to be replaced by a new AI that rose up from the holographic pad. With a storm of wind, the artificial

intelligence revealed itself to be female in silver ceremonial armor, looking very much alike to some Classic Age goddess. It greeted first, as was the usual place for AI's.

"Greetings, Spartan-087. I am MIL AI 8275, more commonly known as Ananke," the AI began with a polite bow. Kelly had seen Lisbon Station, and knew it didn't house a smart AI, and the Ember Light was the only UNSC ship in this system. If Ananke was a military AI; as evidenced the MIL tag, then where was she operating from? An armor suit? SPI armor didn't have such capabilities, though it made sense if there was one or two of ONI's IV's nearby, watching everyone closely.

>As if guessing all her inquisitions, Ananke answered.<p>

"I am a specially designed unit, meant specifically for the V Program. I am Vice Admiral Rich's overseer on the Program, as well as assistant to Doctor Cathrine Halsey," Ananke explained.

Halsey... the same Halsey that she hadn't seen since ONI; more specifically Admiral Parangosky, had her imprisoned? If Ananke was both an overseer for a high ranking ONI officer as well as assisting Doctor Halsey, then the situation might just be the same. Was this V Program the next Spartan program mentioned by Agent Harrison?

More interestingly so, if Ananke was an overseer for the V Program, why was she here?

"So you're an ONI AI," Kelly finally responded, looking at the hologram. Unless they happened to rest by sheer coincidence in the same star system that ONI was using as a training ground for the new Spartans, then Ananke shouldn't be here at all. "More importantly, for the new Program. I'd like to know why you are here, and not there."

"The Program has significant backing, the latest technology..." Ananke dodged the question. "All AI's can create splinters of themselves. As one of the most latest designs incorporating Forerunner technology, my communication abilities are well beyond anything a specialist could have even predicted a century ago. I am still in my central data base, back with the project, but a splinter of me is here with you. More than just a set of dumb processes, but a splinter with the ability to converse and observe."

"It must be something considerable to take the effort of coming all the way out here," Kelly answered the AI, staring at its holographic eyes. It was a hard habit to break, even though any attempt to read an AI's body language was doomed to failure. They were smart enough to not communicate what they didn't want organics to see.

"Not quite, I was already at Lisbon Station before you arrived," Ananke disagreed. Some eye motion did occur for a second, the AI's eyes glancing around, not able to break its own programmed habit of moving its avatar's eyes around with its actual viewing ports. Yes, something was up. What exactly? Why was this new V Program AI here? A message from Doctor Halsey? Ananke answered that question.

>"See, I am an advanced seventh generation AI, one of the few assembled by the UNSC. The extent of my superior processing power, allows me to divide myself up between a series of tasks. While I am an AI of the Spartan V Program, that is not why I am here today. I am

here on behalf of Vice Admiral Ned Rich, with a very... delicate, new number of orders."<p>

New orders? From ONI? Something about this seemed very strange. If they wanted to issue new orders, even over the top of already existing mandates, they just handed it over in front of everyone, not try to fling in conflicting directives from the shadows and hoping the brass didn't notice.

"A new order?" she questioned, reconfirming what the AI had said, before putting forward an error in that. "As far as I know, the Spartan III program is not under the control of Vice Admiral Rich."

Ananke didn't respond, her avatar disappearing to be replaced by a comm logo. There were different symbols to represent different kinds of transmission communiques. This one however, she hadn't seen. On a second inspection, it appeared to be a planet; most likely Earth from the looks of it, was guarded by a shield and a spear.

"If you are not aware, this symbol, even highly unrecognized by even the most seasoned ONI agents, is representative of a Section Zero mandate," Ananke explained. Kelly frowned, not being able to recount any chatter about Section Zero, ONI's internal investigation. Not knowing anything about a very important matter was a sure way to put any Spartan at unease.

>"I am deviated from my tasks to deliver highly classified Intel, to you, on the order of a Cell, which I cannot even divulge the operating code name of."<p>

"But, your Vice Admiral is apart of this cell, right?" Kelly assumed. Ananke didn't answer immediately and her eyes flickered, as if studying her more closely as well.

"Yes," Ananke answered without complexity. A lie? Or a more cloudier truth? It couldn't matter. Spooks weren't known for sharing. Ananke continued.

>"Everything I tell you here today, is obviously highly classified, and not to be divulged to anyone, even superior officers, unless they give the appropriate code word: Exodus. Breach of this is grounds for immediate execution under the Security Act. Do you understand?"<p>

"Yes," Kelly simply nodded. It wasn't the first time highly classified information has passed before her, but the fact that this information couldn't even be divulged to higher ranking comrades always made it seem shameful, a small; if unimportant and necessary, betrayal but a betrayal none the less.

"Good," Ananke nodded, slapping together her hands. "Now, as I previously revealed, I am here delivering orders from a top secret cell acting under the authority of Section Zero. This cell is made up of internal investigators, as well as a number of high ranking ONI and Fleet officers, formed only recently upon the secret orders of an Admiral who shall remain unnamed. The purpose of this cell is simple: to remove the current CINCONI."

This got immediately far too out of depth. ONI and Fleet politics were not something to get caught up in. Conspiring against the head of the organization was beyond traitorous.

"What you speak of, is treason," Kelly answered, leaning forward to stare straight face to face with the AI.

"This action is sanctioned by Order Z694, of the Internal Investigations Act of twenty four, twenty two," Ananke dismissed that claim. "This cell is secret however, as if Admiral Parangosky ever found that we were plotting, those who make up the cell would have disappeared in a single day. The corruption is deep to the point we must carry out our orders unbeknownst to the rest of ONI.

"On just what basis does this cell believe they have to attempt to remove the Admiral?" Kelly asked.

"Unknown to only a handful of high ranking officers within ONI, recently we have made first contact with a significant number of new neighboring alien civilizations," Ananke explained, folding her arms. "Instead of sharing this Intel with Fleet and the civilian Senate, as would be expected, the CINCONI chose to keep this information private to only those in the inner circle, to keep all the benefits from this contact to themselves."

"They uncovered new aliens, and didn't inform the UEG?" Kelly questioned what had already been stated, not able to grasp that. "How could ONI alone manage a first contact situation?"

"By making it a one way contact, that's how," Ananke told her. A list of statistics and personnel rosters appeared beside the AI's hologram. On top of that, a list of reports with text too small for even Kelly's enhanced eyesight to read appeared. "The acts which ONI has already committed against these galactic powers would be grounds of war if they ever found what we were doing. They are clueless while ONI has been extracting technological advances. The weapon you previously recovered in your previous op, was one of those stolen alien weapons, leaked to Insurrectionist forces. You would understand by now, that the current CINCONI's actions have compromised the UNSC's security, as well as our ability to fight."

"Your... reasons, for divulging this Intel to me?" Kelly questioned again. While it would be considered treasonous to be compromising the UNSC itself, there was no exact regulation that stopped the Office of Naval Intelligence from doing whatever the hell it wanted. Still, holding back such an enormity of information from the UEG seemed one step too far.

"As you have been recently informed, the CINCONI has recently approved orders for the termination and dismantling of the Spartan III Program. As you know, there are many much more obvious ways to cut back in the budget and keep necessary surplus forces. Keeping the Company in cryogenic storage for one, would be a much more apparent solution. We realize this, and feel that something far more galvanizing than a budget cut was the reason that CINCONI has chosen to sign your company's death warrant. This unjustified act is murder, and the cell has decided to sign its own orders to stop this from happening."

It was some small sense at last. There were so many better alternatives than scrapping an entire company's worth of Spartans.



"How exactly, would you do that?" Kelly questioned, slightly curious.

"Rebel forces are assembling an illegal star ship on the New Brandenburg colony. Previously, the navy and ONI would see it destroyed, but Section Zero wants the ship acquired, both as a tool and as a source of Intel. The Fleet Commander leading the attack has new orders to allow Gamma Company to remove the ship instead of it being destroyed."

"That's possible," she replied, nodding.

"Once you are away from Brandenburg, a proper AI will gather an intelligence possible from the ship. Once that is done, you are all to remain on standby until Section Zero deems it acceptable to return to service in Navspec operations. While that may be a long time frame, cyro should be available," Ananke explained.

"I understand."

"Indeed," the AI splinter acknowledged. "These new orders are now top priority, overruling any priorities to combat rebel operations. Preservation of Gamma Company is now your utmost concern. These orders are of top classification and are not to be divulged to anyone, ever, without clearance code. This communication now ends. See your orders completed, Spartan." The AI nodded before the hologram fizzled out and disappeared.

Before she could contemplate and think about what she had just been told, the dumb shipboard AI reappeared for a second.

"Splinter communication has now ceased and been summarily erased. Reconnection now impossible. If of non-classified priority importance, please make notes of communicate. Messages will not be repeated."

It disappeared as well. The ONI AI; a messenger of Section Zero, had disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

Funnily enough (or whatever could pass off as that), she didn't feel at all anything near relieved from that conversation. It felt more like been taken out of one approaching catastrophe and been catapulted into another. Still, as always, orders were orders.

The Section Zero mandate did indeed update the briefing orders passed down on the Tacpad, orders now been corrected from focusing on assaulting and destroying rebel positions to heading straight to the ship and seeing it taken into orbit. It was an improvement, definitely, but would accelerate them straight into the firing line of ONI's internal conflicts. If that was the price however, for saving the entire company, it was a risk that was almost ridiculous not to take.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em>Author Afterward:<em>  
><strong>

\*\*Another thread of the plot: internal conflict among ONI. Makes sense with what's going on, with even Section Zero getting involved.

><strong>

**\*\*Apologies for taking so long to get an actual chapter posted. It began with not writing anything in the big release weeks (Halo 4's impact later...), and then getting bogged down in end of year assignments. This chapter was rewritten three times, as matter of fact. I wanted this element of the story of WHY ONI has internal conflict to be made clear, however much that may take, and make it seem like ONI has some way to deal with the absolute dictatorship of whoever is CINCONI at the time.**

><strong>

**\*\*After playing Halo 4, I decided to let a include a few elements (Lasky as Captain of Infinity, Forerunner Tech, etc), but I wanted to keep it based in the traditional aftermath of Halo 3 scenario (Sanghelios not constantly in civil conflict, Master Chief gone, Forerunners still unknown to most of the galaxy) for the sake of story later on.**

><strong>

## 8. Amendment

**\*\*Amendment\*\***

Alrighty. Yea, you've clicked on this link to read the latest chapter and you're disappointed that there isn't any. I feel your pain, and understand. It's been awhile since I last updated this fic. A lot of responsibilities have got in the way, and have left little time for purely recreational writing. However, the flag of defeat isn't being raised.

Truth is, Chapter V has existed for months now. In fact, five different drafts of it have been written. Each one was discarded half completed. From the battle of New Brandenburg, the still ailing Citadel, the top secret Onyx-Trevlyn Shield World, to even Illium. Each one, I'm trying, trying to tell the next chapter but failing to see it through. Truth is, they haven't been up to scratch. I'm trying to avoid both boring or likewise, cringe-worthy moments (if I had the chance, I'd rewrite all the Shepard sections over again. They are currently simply just awful...)

This doesn't mean Kin From The Stars is completely dead. Well... it's kinda currently dead like a fish, but I've put some recent effort in to a sixth draft of Chapter Six, incorporating a few new scenes here and there, plus using a lot of my previously drafted content, currently sitting at about five thousand words, so maybe an actual Chapter V is possible on the horizon. It's not like I don't know what to write. I have a clear path for this story, but life has left me with little opportunity to tell it.

So I'd just like to confirm the lack of activity for now. I've got things stacking up, so I'll be needing to finish them off before I can get back to this.

At best, I can guess Chapter V will be up by next Sunday, followed by a more steady stream of updates. So until then, just know that Kin From the Stars will be back, at some point in the future. Till then, bye.

\_\*\*UPDATE\*\*\_

Actually, to amend some ache on the fake update, here's an excerpt from the upcoming Chapter V. Just to make this a worthwhile read.

\*\*CHAPTER V PREVIEW\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><em>Traditionally our creators have been reluctant to take outsiders' advice; nation to nation, culture to culture. Their history is littered with empires, crumbling for want of simple openness to so-called 'foreign beliefs and innovations'. The question is: can this Assembly still function as adequate stewards to our creator's latest empire and remain aloof? The answer, we believe, is no. - Majority of the Assembly<em>

\* \* \*

><p>There was a rare radiance of tranquility in this office suite, the majestic view giving a sweeping view of Sydney, a city that, while still scarred by Covenant orbital bombardments, has rebuilt and even prospered following the end of the Covenant War. Beyond the cluster of sky-scrappers that dominated the coast, further inland was only endless stretches of low-rises, suburbia and industrial estates.<p>

Despite the environmental turmoil of the early twenty first century, and later, war scars, the capital of the United Earth Government remained the most pristine corner of the planet. The ocean still glittered a marvelous blue.

Of course, Osman doubted this view might even be real. Admiral Parangosky has the paranoia of legend, and it wouldn't be surprising if what were seen as windows were really high-def screens, or even a hologram. Inside the office of ONI's Director, Parangosky's aging fingers grasped an antique teacup, slowly drinking the coffee within. The way her withered hands shook as it grasped the cup was just another unpleasant reminder of the unstoppable march of age.

"You'd stop staring at my hands like that, Serin," Parangosky suddenly spoke up, surprising her guest. "Trust me, you'll no doubt be just as withered at my age," a smile played across the old Admiral's face. No matter how much physical decay the body showed, Parangosky's mind was as sharp and alert as ever.

"Sorry, but it's... quite noticeable," Osman answered. This day and age, she wished Parangosky would simply resign her post. Despite an almost faltering of health just a few years ago, something kept her alive and going, as if something was incomplete. Maybe it was the stress and weight of the 'contact', that had kept Parangosky sticking around. It seemed, the UNSC and peace were two words never to be united.

"Physicality is something nobody should be worried about this day and age..." Parangosky muttered, placing down her cup. "Oldest man alive lived till two hundred! Damn if I'm going to be measured up for a coffin at only over a hundred..."

"The mandatory retirement age," Osman gave that little reminder. Parangosky only ignored it, turning slightly to gaze out to the view.

"Too many things to see finished," Parangosky simply told her. "It's not that I don't trust you to uphold what I've built, but... there are things I have yet to find answers for, that we must have answers for."

"The Contact threat," Osman simply stated.

"More than that. We still never happened what happened to the Chief, poor soul..." Parangosky noted. The Chief himself had been MIA since the New Phoenix incident in twenty five, fifty eight, last being seen on Ivanoff Station's surveillance, taking a Broadsword in pursuit of a Forerunner Cruiser with a warhead. The same warhead that was detonated inside the Cruiser as it unleashed its energy weapon on Earth. Neither the Chief nor the Forerunner he was reported to have been pursuing were ever seen again.

Months later, the Infinity returned to Requiem and found no resistance, just an empty Shield World. There weren't even Engineers like on Onyx. Requiem was just an empty shell. It was presumed that the Covenant fanatics simply dissolved back into Sangheili space following the defeat of their deity, their leader Jul 'Mdama disappearing. The Prometheans disappeared, never to be encountered again anywhere in the galaxy, giving credence to the theory that they had all perished in the destruction of their capital ship.

Osman remembered Parangosky's own concerns that the threat had never really ended, that ONI still suspected that the Forerunners were still out there, somewhere, biding their time, waiting... for something. Perhaps that was the ghost that still haunted her. As for the Chief himself... he'd been through so much and faced down so many impossible odds, that nobody would ever be convinced that he was dead until they saw a body.

"We still have so much to find in this galaxy, and so many threats to quash," Parangosky noted, almost sighing. "I doubt I'll ever see Humanity safe."

Osman remained silent, uncomfortably. It was certainly true, that they would never see true peace anywhere in their life times, especially while they were simply stalling for time in the face of the coming storm. They needed an answer. A permanent answer to the Contact threat that would end the tension that had been boiling ONI from the inside for over a year now.

"Humanity. That's a tricky word to apply, knowing what we know," Parangosky finally continued. "As much common ground we have with our... relatives, I doubt we'll ever really embrace each other."

"It's not just them we're facing trouble from," Osman reminded her. Not just Insurrectionists now, but the traitors within their very organization.

>"I've heard mummings of... discontent," Osman stated. Of course, it was extremely difficult for her to pick up such information. Being Parangosky's protege, she was possibly the person that any

conspirator within ONI would least likely involve. Hearing it only passed on through various Officers, it was only indescribable whispers of rebellion against ONI's current director.<p>

"I know," Parangosky simply answered. "I'm not surprised that its spread so far and wide. We're lucky we have as little leaks as we've encountered thus far."

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"And, I heard, what you plan as the solution to the Three problem," Osman then added, hesitantly. There was a time when she thought Parangosky's secrets stretched no higher than the UNSC Infinity's construction. Everything, even information as sensitive as the Contact Threat had been shared. That Parangosky would address the issue with the Spartan Three program without a murmur, was disconcerting, especially to her.

Parangosky returned a glance that could break glass. Apparently, that was one topic that was untouchable between them.

"God forbid, that a day could come where I would hand off some of the best soldiers we've ever seen to make the budget stretch..." Parangosky commented, confirming Osman's worse fears. She honestly hoped, that it was inaccurate information. But then, Parangosky continued. "When that day comes, I'll know I've gone mad. Maybe I already have. But, today, even to you Osman, the solution to the issue is something I can't discuss. Not yet, until the operation is concluded."

That vague statement was puzzling and troubling. Parangosky didn't deal in vague terms, but this time, it was something that would be kept under key until the smoke cleared.

"On the topic of Spartans," Parangosky continued to speak, undaunted by what had just been said, "I know you also paid a visit to our dear old Doctor."

"I simply wish I'd known about it much sooner. Especially with the history between us all and Doctor Cathrine Halsey," Osman replied. "Years ago, you were content to lock her up and throw the key into a black hole."

"Times change," Parangosky shrugged. "I've honestly come to a better understanding now than I ever did. We'll never be free of our crimes, and desperate times seem in abundance these days."

Osman had little choice but to agree. She didn't like Halsey, not a single bit, but... there was a point to what they had unleashed her for. With how events were rapidly transpiring these days, Osman wondered if Halsey would even have the chance to deploy her new Spartan V's before Contact happened.

"I've come to that understanding too. We are getting particularly desperate."

"If I could wind back the cloak, I'd do it again," Parangosky said, but added, "without the mistakes. Too much unnecessary blood was shed along the way, like the Charnara Incident... but, we're only only step closer to the answer."

"And you think Halsey's new Spartans are that answer?"

Parangosky thought on that one, before speaking. "They are apart of the answer. I wouldn't be surprised if we reached the point of war, but even if we avoid that, there will be much strife on the road ahead."

## 9. V - Assured Destruction

**\*\*Chapter V: Assured Destruction\*\***

\* \* \*

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That was the hardest to swallow. Even during the darkest days of the war, when the Covenant firmly held Earth and the remaining days were numbered, Parangosky had never voiced something so hopeless, so cynical. This was a threat on an entirely different level to the Covenant. Whereas the Prophets promised physical destruction, this new threat would shatter the very foundations that their entire species had built upon for hundreds of years now. In the view of many, it would even strip away the last fledgling scraps of justification the UNSC had to uphold itself.

That itself, made Osman bitter with the fact. That someone could simply come along, with only a bare fifth of the experience, and all they had to present was a flawed, failing system, that would shatter over four hundred years of her civilization's progress. That was a total frustration. It was like they were being treated as\_ inferior\_, the entire UNSC, as if they had to curl up and hide from a nasty truth they couldn't face.

In truth, they\_ were cowering\_. ONI was cowering. Humanity was cowering. That shouldn't be allowed to stand.

"We shouldn't consider ourselves inferior to them," Osman finally voiced. "We've achieved so much more. We are stronger."

"More arrogant too," Parangosky added, putting a whole new harsher turn on the conversation. That was an unexpected barb. Parangosky continued as if the whole thing had gone over Osman's head.

>"We can't trust in military, technological, industrial or even ONI's prowess at this point. When the inevitable day comes, save a miracle, the battle will be fought on a different field."<p>

"Then the point of our continuing weapons research? Unleashing Halsey?" Osman questioned.

"They will be entirely new weapons, built for this new war," Parangosky explained. "They aren't conventional resources, none that the wooden top navy should even know about. They are resources built for shattering the enemy's resolve and capability. As a last option... a game changer, something that would remove the threat permanently."

Could the System's Alliance, and in larger effect: the entire Citadel Space be capable of countering or even detecting a sudden, brutal assault? Did they have any defenses that could stop a NOVA Warheads from obliterating their worlds? While the UNSC had developed technologies that specialized in detecting such high-radiation weapons, had the System's Alliance ever considered such an unforeseen event could occur? Seeing as they had only just invented a limited form of stealth craft, it was unlikely they ever had contingencies beyond waging conventional warfare. They were totally unprepared in the event of assault by a technologically advanced power.

It was a wonder they survived this long, but then again, all the System's Alliances neighbours shared the same lack of intellect, to go beyond the conventional. Even the Reapers in arrogance had discarded the advantage they held, to simply blindly leap into the fray and engage their enemies on the same level of combat.

"If it came down to it, we'd be prepared to wipe out our... brethren species in such an act?" Osman asked inquisitively.

"There is one thing to understand for it to make sense," Parangosky explained. "It is our duty to protect the UNSC and its people by any means possible. In our place, they would do the same. Think about in the Cold War, neither did not hesitate nor back down. If it came down to it, if the first strike was launched, the others would return fire, even if their own people, their nation, were already doomed to die. They would condone millions more, unnecessary, to death in nuclear fire. Why? Because the alternative is to simply die. To let the enemy win."

Parangosky simply left the comparison there, sighing. "That is the last resort. All our hopes ride upon a solution."

\* \* \*

><p>The only thing that outweighed Thompson Gilerson's phobia of being in buried in the collapse of some unstable underground lair, was that of being simply being killed straight up. Thus, risking being buried alive was an acceptable trade today. In the makeshift command center at the heart of a commandeered UNSC facility, he pushed those thoughts aside as he listened to the comm piece on his ear.<p>

The Air Force was on the move, gearing up on a squadron of Aircraft Carriers not too far from the mainland now. The colossal seafaring vessels were deployed from special carrier ships of their own, dropped into the oceans of colony worlds to provide quick and instantly established bases for in-atmosphere fliers. One could be landed on a dissident colony and be expected to be the only base the UNSC forces needed to secure the planet, each carrier capable of launching a compartment of six hundred unmanned Drone fighters as well as a hundred Human manned fighter jets.

>Three Carrier's worth? How many aircraft were they planning on launching?<p>

He breathed out heavily, placing the earpiece on the table in front of him. It was undeniable. They were coming.

In his own anxiety, he found his heart beating rapidly and his fingers curling and tapping his palms. He was scared, yes.

"The Air Forces rallying only proves that the Navy really is planning to come for us," former Brigadier General Max Shawn swirled the mug of coffee in his hands. The rebel commander glared in Thompson's direction.

>"You know there's quite slim chance of us coming out of here, alive, right?"<p>

"I understand that perfectly," Thompson responded, glancing up at the general. Max only frowned, still shaking the coffee around as he seemed deep in thought. The both of them stewed in the silence as seconds past. In a situation such as this, time was valuable commodity that couldn't be spent lightly. They had been caught out, unexpectedly. The UNSC knew what they were up to, and struck hard and fast without any prior sign of warning. Worst of all, they were stuck firmly groundside.

"The mechanics down in launch, told me that we aren't going anywhere for the next two hours. Not until they get those Slip Space drives properly activated," Max told him, leaning against the desk. Two hours might be time they didn't have. While they should have been prepped to go anytime, those Slip Space drives had only been fitted two weeks before, and the mechanics were still adjusting them to make sure that they worked one hundred percent, as sure as they could be without actually taking the ship for a test flight.

They couldn't launch any Freighter with the coördinates. The UNSC still held a firm grasp over all inter-system travel and, as well, there wasn't enough fuel in the most advanced freighter's to reach the target they desired. They had spent months acquiring the correct; untagged and unregistered, parts and configuring them onto their ship, a repaired Stead Class Freighter Chassis. While a military Corvette could make the trip, and in half the time, such fuel compression and Slip Space technologies were military secrets, the discrepancies in performance between civilian and military vessels only growing larger and larger following the end of the Covenant War.

They themselves had to fit multiple Slip Space drives and expanded fuel tanks onto the chassis simply to get the performance needed to reach their destination. Even so, they'd only be taking himself, Max and two dozen personnel for a eight year cyro trip that would hopefully change Human history.

"With those Frigates about, you really think we'll be able to clear the atmosphere in time?" Thompson asked, the former ONI Agent scowled.

"Clearing the atmosphere? Slight chance..." Max shook his head, finally taking a sip of his hot drink as he gathered his words. He finally returned his eyes back to Thompson.

>"If we can't however, I'm willing to risk an in-atmosphere

jump..."<p>

"You are aware of the fallout from our drive configuration, correct?" Thompson glanced up, understanding what that implied. An in-atmosphere jump with a drive their size and scale, would cause immense fallout, if not a Slip-Space bubble burst, just like when that Covenant Carrier had jumped in the midst of New Mombasa during the war.

"I am aware," Max told him, "and I believe it's worth it. If this could very well be the thing that changes the course of our rebellion, I'd damn well do it to a dozen worlds, if only to liberate a hundred more."

"Understandable," Thompson gave a short nod, though in truth, he couldn't agree. The whole point of this, was that they could be able to take a chance that could see Earth overthrown, but not destroyed, as well as the colonies. Still, it was their fault for forcing them to this decision. It would be worth it.

He was a spook, formerly, when the United Nations Space Command actually had reason to be. Like many personnel that had joined the various departments, when the Covenant War was over, he'd never been supportive of the continuing policy against colonial rebels. He himself... chose to stay, if only to stop some blood thirsty innies bombing Earth like they did Mamore. Just because he didn't agree with the government, didn't mean he wanted to see his home destroyed.

>He continued to do his duty, work for ONI. Thompson knew he had convinced himself it was the best for all of them. That had been shattered less than seven months ago.<p>

When he had simply been an agent handling materials for the Beta-Three group, and curiosity between him and some fellow agents went a little too far, what he had uncovered had been shocking and beyond unexpected. If ONI was preparing to deal with a more free Humanity and their allies, which possibly together outdid the post Covenant War UNSC in terms of territory and resources...

It was a revelation. If the right rebels; good people with the good cause, could gain access to that information... a transition to a less totalitarian government became more a pipe-dream. It wasn't the first time he'd considered something treasonous, but it was the first time it appealed to him. It was sensible. It was logical. A powerful foreign force, benevolently intentioned or not, would either finally provide the death blow to the UNSC's iron fisted rule, through any action. All people needed to know was that there was a better way of life out there and a way to transition there that didn't involve dying in fruitless, scattered and doomed rebellions.

He'd done his research, read through ONI's files on just the right people to contact. Maximilian Shawn had fought in the army for most of the Covenant War, and his career had pinnacle'd at serving as a Brigadier General. Unlike most of the senior command, he'd never been apart of the army during the pre-war Insurrection, and immediately after the Covenant War, he had retired back to his home colony of New Brandenburg, to become a very loud spoken critic of the UNSC's policy on colonial affairs.

>After two years of being ignored completely, and being reduced to nothing but a footnote in the local paper, he fell off the radar,

eventually emerging again after four years as an adviser for New Brandenburg Liberation Army, a more ideological group who simply wanted the UNSC off their turf. When ONI bit back, successfully eliminating the Liberation Army leader; some inexperienced militia leader, a more dangerous foe in the form of the former General rose to replace him. Successfully driving the government out of particular regions, the Liberation Army became a serious concern, but nothing compared to the rebel planets like Venezia, who were armed with Covenant weaponry and intent on taking a militant stance against Earth. They'd been ignored, until recently.<p>

Now, they held something more dangerous than a NOVA warhead. They held the key; these simple set of coordinates, to a better existence to all, a liberation. It wouldn't have surprised him if ONI's first thought was to nuke the planet entirely, burn every last scrap of evidence to pieces. New Brandenburg was little in the way of a tactical asset. It was an ailing colony which agricultural potential never proved to be as good as the first surveyors originally thought. But ONI wasn't bloody thirsty, and the deployment of Special Forces would only guarantee a more focused, controlled burn.

"I'm going to be with the ship," Max finally spoke again. "This command center won't hold long. Are all of your preparations set?"

Thompson paused, rethinking it all, before answering, "Yes. I've handed over everything I have left, to your men."

That itself was a lie. He'd handed over every last bit he'd 'requisitioned' from ONI, all for one device. He had thought of sharing that too, but he couldn't take the chance, and this was personal. If they did die, and they didn't succeed in reaching their destination... then the information that their enemies so desperately sought would end up in the hands of a person he knew he could trust... and the names of others he knew could remount the effort they made here. Still, he'd set the Slip-Space Self-Mobile COM Probe on standby for ten years. There was no point sending others into the abyss if they had in fact made the trip, and in ten years time, they would either be in shallow graves or returning back home victorious.

"Good, good," Max nodded, finally turned around. "We'll give em hell." He gestured around, pointing away. "All right! We're packing up everyone! Move everything to the ship!"

Various personnel began packing up electronic systems, readouts and radios. Most of the crucial equipment had already been moved to the bridge of their new vessel. As of now, they rushed to remove what little they had left behind. They would have to abandon the COM Interception gear, as it was too heavy to transport, and most likely the way ONI had tracked them down. Thompson spent his last moments in the temporary center listening in as best as he could, waiting to hear some command go through the channels for the attack to begin. When it finally came, it brought chills to his heart.

\_"UNSC Idella, this is Groundside Task Force. Sierra-Gamma has begun the attack.\_

\* \* \*

><p>Even underneath his helmet which filtered out unnecessary audio, Isaiah could still hear the whirling of the Falcon's blades as they sped over the Tyren Ocean, on the colony of New Brandenburg. They fit quite well in the Falcon's troop bay, with the three man strong Scimitar Team sharing the ride with a pair of Headhunter Operatives.<p>

When they touched down on the shoreline, the Headhunters were going to do the target hunting, while the main Company strong force would decimate the innies all around the place. It had been a few years since all of Gamma Company had all their boots in the same combat zone, as well as their Headhunter comrades to back them up.

"Once we land, it's head crushing time, right Boss?" Chris questioned through their helmet comms, using the boss moniker for their squad leader they had since training. They were all thankful that Chris had recovered from their previous encounter with that rouge Spartan IV, and it was notable that he had changed slightly... less restraint. It was a path that Isaiah had seen too many of the company follow.

"Eager to get back in the fight?" Isaiah asked, gripping his own weapon, the MA5K, one of the weapons most familiar to Gamma Company.

"I won't lie to you, sir. Hell yes," Chris nodded as far as his helmet would allow him to throw his head back and forward. "Killing the same bastard that armed that snake? We got to admit, this is personal."

"Don't lose your cool, Scimitar," Isaiah responded, "we are not letting the Commander down this time. Stay focused. Once we land, we'll be following up and providing support for these Headhunters here," he nodded to the two of them sitting on the edge of the Falcon's troop bay edge. The pair seemed to be having their own private conversation between each other through their helmet comms.

"Wouldn't dream of failure, sir!" David gave his own eager nod, striking the end of the SAW Light Machine gun against the Falcon's deck. The large clatter of the heavy weapon striking metal caused one of the Headhunters to glare back at them for a second before turning back to look out to the ocean waves, which were rolling now as they got closer to the mainland, which rose on the horizon.

"All teams?" \_the Commander called over the comm channels. Her voice sounded unusually strained, but loud none the less. \_"First assault wave shall be touching down in only five minutes now. Keep to your objective, and get this job done, Gamma. Failure is not an acceptable outcome."\_

The comm channel closed and they were left for the wait. They could all see the beaches growing larger and larger on the horizon. Any other day, it might have been what was considered as a tropical paradise. White sands, palm trees and a sparkling blue ocean. That wasn't now however. Smoke was already rising up from destroyed Insurrectionist fortifications that stood between the beaches and jungles. Usually, the heavy batteries installed in those bunkers would have stopped even a low atmosphere Frigate from coming anywhere near close, but the UNSC Air Force had struck hard and fast.

Now broken concrete littered everywhere from the shoreline to the where the sands crossed into the thick tropical jungle, which was already aflame. At least they were certain that few rebels were still standing. Gamma would run right over them. All audio began to be blocked out as a flurry of new commands shot across the COM. The landings began.

\_"Falcon Bravo Four, reporting. Deployment immediate"\_

Their Falcon didn't land, but passed over low and slowing. Scimitar rose to their feet, and grasped their weapons firm. The Headhunters waited on the edge for the moment. As soon as they passed over the water, onto the sandy beaches, they leaped. This action was repeated for the entirety of all the landed forces. Dozens of squads were deployed, the Falcons quickly rising back up into the air and laying down suppressing fire as they turned around.

It wasn't like there were Innies forces left standing to greet them however. The first aerial assault had cleared out most of the troops waiting to ambush any assault wishing to establish a beachhead. Still, Gamma Company rushed forth, their SPI making them a fearsome charge of ghost warriors. They were a mirage as they sprinted up off the beaches into the dense rainforest. There were still rebel units dug in that had survived the assault, and they finally rose out of their dug outs to bring heavy static weapon emplacements to bear on their attackers. But even they weren't prepared for the sheer brunt of Gamma Company.

Insurrectionists began to fall as they open fired. Their SPI armor kept them no more than a blur until they finally came within range. Rebels began firing in return, but it was too late to halt the advance and to close for their fortifications to be used as an advantage now. A full company of Spartans fell upon them.

Isaiah led Scimitar at the front of it, his MA5B raised firmly in front of him. His life long training reduced the battle to a blur, a ritualistic rush that he carried out without thought. Every target that was sighted was instantly targeted and brought down with a precise burst of assault rifle fire. His augmentations made them a wave of killing machines, stampeding through rebel lines. As they accumulated battle damage, their invisibility devolved to simply being a mirage of death and slaughter. He did not question where his team mates whereas he knew instinctively that they were at his side, following his lead. All he thought about was charging forward and continuing the killing until there wasn't an Innie left standing.

The dense rainforest made a total killing ground, as rebels attempted to retreat over the treacherous terrain, only to be caught by the faster moving Spartans. Some engaged in hand to hand combat as they closed in, the unaugmented Humans no match for the prowess of an experienced Spartan. Isaiah could guess that only a small force had been planted here as a barrier before the actual rebel stronghold, to slow down any attacker.

They eventually broke through however, rainforest giving way to open fields which had seemingly be cleared decades ago. It was still difficult terrain, with ridges and natural trenches making it a slow advance. A new wave of rebels joined the fight, these ones being not

uniformed troops, but a militia. They used the ridges as cover, and actual Insurgent troops began using grenadier tactics, lobbing explosives towards where the Spartans had found their own cover.

In this longer range terrain, the Spartans switched to proper skirmish tactics. They no longer had the sheer charging power and the advantage of fully cloaked SPI Armor in a dense environment. Some didn't abide to this however, some squads pressing over the difficult terrain to meet the enemy at a closer range. While SPI Armor was no real protection against Covenant plasma fire, it was definitely strong enough to shrug off most small arms fire. Still, Isaiah disapproved of such risky tactics; if they could be even called tactics. Scimitar held position from cover, Isaiah switching to his Battle Rifle to target enemies at a distance.

More delaying tactics as the rebels began a torch and burn to cover their retreat. SPI was higher quality than standard ODST Armor, designed to survive the sheer acceleration of riding a Drop Pod into an atmosphere, but they would roast if they actually tried to press through anything more than a small bush fire. The rebels seemed content on starting a wall of fire to hold their attackers back.

As more and more rebels retreated from battle before their escape was blocked off by the fires, new orders came through.

\_"Sierra Gamma, press forward. Rebel forces cannot be allowed time to retreat."\_

As conventionally foolhardy as it sounded, pressing forward both into flames as well as possibly more fortified insurgent positions instead of attempting to flank around, it certainly gave proof the rebels were stalling for time. They needed to advance, no matter what the cost. What might have been a suicidal order for Marines, was the acceptable to a Spartan III.

"Press forward, Scimitar!" Isaiah shouted to his squad members as he charged forward. They rolled forward, a green wave, as the entire Gamma Company stopped skirmishing and resumed the charge. What rebel units remained immediately broke and scattered in all directions at the sight of the assault. What few that were left, cut off from retreat by the fires behind them, were mowed down without pause by charging Spartans.

They continued through the flames. Isaiah barred his teeth as he felt his SPI Armor heat up and the more delicate systems crash from overheating. Gel boiled. Their invisibility was gone now, and their skin was almost aflame itself as they pressed through unbearable heat. Thankfully however, the fires were short in width, and they emerged out the other side alive, where more rebels had hunkered down, waiting for them.

While their SPI and under armour was flameproof, the cooled gel between the armor plates preventing their skin from incurring any serious burns save some serious blistering, they never the less trailed flames and still flaming elements of the forest. If there anything that was more morally crushing than seeing over a few hundred flaming Spartans come charging out of an inferno into your ranks, it would only be contained within hell itself.

Their weapons suffered significant trauma, and Isaiah felt his skin



blister. While he had only spent less than a dozen seconds among the flames, his armor had overheated and the gel layer had most likely begun to melt.

Even though all of them were suffering in pain, they did not cease, nor did they slow. Isaiah raised his Assault Rifle and began firing at the first rebels he saw. Bullets pinged off the edges of his armor, and he saw some Spartans alongside him fall.

This entire assault was absolutely disastrous. Their air support had evaporated after landing, and no other UNSC units seemed present or even attacking the rebels on other fronts. Any soldier could have instantly recognized the battle they were fighting was doomed to fail, but Gamma Company weren't regular soldiers. They continued to press on, through odds that would obliterate any company of even the most hardened and experienced ODST's.

The battle continued, as Spartans continued to route the rebels. The wall of fire seemed to be their last line, as Gamma Company finally reached their proper fortifications, reaching the AA Weapons that had stopped the Falcons from dropping them closer to the actual rebel stronghold. They were proper Viper Missile Batteries, serious enough hardware to take any UNSC aircraft out of the sky. Concreted enough, even an unshielded Frigate.

After breaking through the last line, they finally emerged into a well cleared, flat field that lay before the outer perimeter fence of the Rebel's main base, which sat up against Tilgen Mountain.

This is where the Headhunters had come in. The wire fences were already in shambles, rebel machine-gun bunkers rubble. Well fortified steel doors that led into the underground lair where the Rebel's had made home was blown right open. Bypassing the main fight, the bulk of the twenty strong Headhunter force had removed the most difficult obstacle in their path.

\_"Great work, Gamma. You're through the front lines. Enter the Insurrectionist stronghold and neutralize all personnel. Priority target are being uploaded as NAV Markers now."\_

The concrete was already thick with blood by time the last shaken rebels were now faced with the actual wave.

Scimitar fought alongside their brothers and sisters as they annihilated what was left of the standing rebels as they pushed deeper into the facility. The rebel stronghold was a former UNSC military installation built in the early period of the Covenant War that had taken advantage of old mining tunnels to dig out a considerable underground base. The rebels hadn't failed to maintain it. Corridors were beige colored, well lit and perfectly constructed, as if they were aboard a UNSC starship.

Without pause, they followed the rebels deeper into their tunnels and corridors. For the first time since landing, Isaiah took a larger accounting of the situation. His mission cloak only read forty minutes since landing. Considering all they had been faced with, it wasn't bad for a lightning strike.

"Be aware, Scimitar. Focus on priority targets," Isaiah advised as he slid a new clip into his rifle. They moved deeper into the

Insurrectionist compound, with two other Fire Teams behind them, though the corridors they came across were occupied only by fallen rebels.

"The Headhunters already probably got em, all, boss," Chris mentioned over their squad COM, "just saying."

"Bet we'll have to go over this entire place anyway," David added, "they can't trust a III to get the job done proper, right?"

"Can it, Scimitar. We're approaching power generators," Isaiah told them. Ahead as an unbreached door and behind it was a NAV marker that Intel marked as being a power source judged by thermal readings. It was highly probable that Innies were still inside.

"Breach and clear," another Squad Leader commanded, the combined fourteen Spartans moving towards the door. A Spartan with an explosives pack moved up to the door and rigged a charge onto it. They pulled back and readied themselves.

"Breach!" was shouted and a second later, the door blasted open. A second later, a noxious brown gas spilled out. The Spartans at first, held position, being protected by their sealed SPI Armor. Their vision was blocked, and the gas was hot enough to cloud their helmet's heat vision. The attack came next.

A Spartan right next to Isaiah collapsed, his faceplate shattering as high-impact rounds suddenly thundered out of the breached room, shattering his limited shield generator in an instant. They were the same fiery rounds they had seen before. A grenade came next, and for a moment, Isaiah felt the world sat painfully still. Spartans scattered, leaped and dodged, but even their masterful reflexes couldn't save them.

The Incendiary Grenade exploded in the midst of them, covering them in that sticky, flaming sand substance. Collectively, they all once again became pyres of flames.

\* \* \*

><p>Fire Team Saber was left to do nothing but follow the Headhunters and other squads wake. Nothing but corpses, both of armed and unarmed rebel personnel alike, simply littered the battle damaged corridors, the florescent light now flickering. They were getting deeper and deeper, to where they could come upon the underground hangar bay where the rebels were keeping the vessel that was their target.<p>

Ash headed the pack, keeping alert. In truth, he was frustrated with being left to pick up the pieces. The only shots they had fired so far was putting down innies that were still clutching onto life as they lay bleeding out on the floor. This was most likely the result of their past failure, to be left to this tiresome duty. This stuff should have been left to Marine squads, to clean up after the actual fighting moved through. Strangely enough, command hadn't landed any additional units, despite the fact that three hundred Spartans would never be able to catch all the rebel remnants that would escape into the jungle.

They continued to move with a grim silence. Ash wondered if the

rebels had any additional preparations or traps. Many weren't actual trained insurgents that would be found elsewhere that were experienced in the art of guerrilla warfare, but former Marine, Army and Defense elements, mixed in with the average rebel militias. They had met them using UNSC tactics, and that was at least worth some commendation, that they fought like proper soldiers, making it far easier to fight an actual battle than spend tedious hours pursuing them down.

Still, killing innies was a boring task for Saber. Organized or unorganized, they were so.. conventional, and predictable. Asides from a few rare rogue Spartan IV's, they weren't even a challenge or a threat. They would much more prefer to be throttling some Elites out on the frontier, but no, here they were, prowling for rebels. Has Command not marked this operation such a high priority, it should have been left to ODST's, even regular marines.

"Hold up," Mark suddenly spoke, raising his arm for them to stop. "Casualties."

They'd been so unfocused that they hadn't noticed that among the corpses, lay a pair of dead Headhunters. Their armor was charred, as if set alight. Ash moved forward, with a good guess what this could be. He knelt down and inspected the damage as his two team members stood alert.

"Flamethrowers?" Mark suggested, tightening up his grip on the Battle Rifle he held.

"No," Ash dismissed. "They wouldn't leave impact like this," he moved his hand along the broken SPI armor. High-impact, like repeated Battle-Rifle shots. More ONI experimental weapons? It was the same weapon they'd used in the previous battle, by that rogue Spartan. How many of these did the rebels get their hands on? How did they take down a pair of experienced Headhunters as well?

Taking one of the charred helmets by the head, he removed a standard data-chip at the back of the fallen Headhunter's head. Placing it in his own helmet, the data unencrypted and appeared. A NAV marker appeared on his HUD, marking a position where ONI spooks had triangulated an intercept on their COMs. Somebody here was listening into their COM chatter and that marked a priority target.

He picked himself back up and stood up. He studied the junction ahead, trying to judge whether there were anymore Innies ahead. Where these Headhunters the only ones pushing forward here? Where there other fire teams ahead? If not... then they were now the front line.

"On alert, Saber," Ash instructed. "Guess we just found the fight."

They moved forward, weapons raised. Nothing was appearing on their motion trackers. The audio began picking up however, with a loud banging coming from the corridors ahead. What was it?

He motioned for them to take up a loose formation, moving forward quickly and quietly. As they had missed out on most of the battle outside, their SPI was still functioning one hundred percent, and they only appeared as ghosts, nothing but a faint presence.

"Hold up," Oliva called, sighting something. "Something."

They halted and after a few seconds of scanning, Ash spotted them too. The trap was almost nigh invisible, that only Oliva's quick eyes had picked up on. They were brown canisters simply sitting around corners, inconspicuous asides from a small device that sat where a grenade's pin would usually sit. These devices could by proximity mines, or simply rigged to explode. This entire place could possibly be rigged to explode and knowing their desperation, they just might do it.

He motioned to Mark, who grabbed a fallen rebel's helmet and tossed it through the upcoming junction, skimming it along the ground. The cannisters didn't detonate, but there was no telling what could set them off. Ash didn't like the look of them, and it was certainly no explosive he recognized. He wished he had his old friend Dante's luck with this kind of stuff. That member of Saber was either a genius or simply had a fantastic luck when it came to explosives.

Ash pushed the thought aside, and motioned for the still living members of Saber to follow him. Now was no time to remember the dead. The best thing they could do was find that COM interceptor and shut it down. The last thing the rebels needed to know was their movement.

The NAV marker was now only a forty meters away. Ash peaked down the corridor, seeing the doors. They stood back, looking for any sign of enemy movement. Slowly, they moved in, noticing more of those cannisters sitting in corners and hidden under corpses. Things were getting tight and they had to be highly cautious. From their underground position, they couldn't contact command nor back out from the fight now. It was expected the deployment of three hundred Spartans would wipe the innies out within the hour.

For all they knew, they could be tip toeing around for naught while the rest of the company was already rallying together to pull out at the heart of the facility. Still, they couldn't be arrogant however. Those dead Headhunters proved that the innies did have capability down here.

Slowly pushing the door open, revealed a room that had most likely at some point, served as a command center. There were still wires lying about, and signs of a recent evacuation. The electronic suite that was intercepting UNSC communications was still there however. A trap? Or simply abandoned? Perhaps they wised up and knew ONI had found them through triangulating the thing?

Never the less, Ash motioned for Mark to simply take it out. He raised his Battle Rifle and with a few precision shots, took out every last part of the device for good. Suddenly, their motion trackers refreshed, now at a wider range. They could now pick up other Spartans now, including the pair of deceased Headhunters they had found. There were two more squads with green status a few dozen meters down from them. A NAV marker also appeared, motioning them downward to their new confirmed target, the Hangar.

"Let's move," Ash nodded, motioning for them to move out. They moved with speed once again, quickly moving to close in on the NAV marker. The corridors down lower were full of nothing but fallen rebels.

Without warning the dozen green signals on his HUD winked off. Their motion scanners were jammed.

"We've lost them," Mark spoke up. "Are they dead or are we just getting jammed again?"

"Don't discount either," Ash warned, still pressing ahead. "We're getting closer."

\* \* \*

><p>The hangar was certainly large enough to house something of serious bulk. Originally, this massive underground space was built with plans to house a generator for an experimental EMP weapon that ONI had hoped could disrupt or even disable Covenant ships in space above. Smaller scale tests failed however, and trying to reproduce it on a larger scale was scrapped. At the same time, UNSC forces were pulled back from New Brandenburg to reinforce more Inner Colonies that were in sight of the Covenant.<p>

The garrison here had defected after the war ended, not that it was made known to any other loyal UNSC forces on the planet. Now this place played host to their greatest plan. Over a year, parts had been brought together. An old Freighter had been taken here, and slowly refitted for a long range journey. New Slip Space drives were fitted as well as additional power sources. Hopefully, it would be enough.

Over eight dozen personnel were still rushing around the ship, making sure all final preparations were ago. Their commander had called in the desperate measures. ONI had landed Spartans which had fought a curbstomp battle surfaceside. As they moved underground, they were slightly countered by more veteran troopers armed with the best weapons they could find. Even some of the stolen System's Alliance weapons they had traded with other rebel factions for the components they needed to complete the ship, were used in combat now. Even with them, it was inevitable that the Spartans find their way here.

It was still an hour until the original ETA that Max had given. They obviously didn't have that long. They were blasting off now, trusting that their Slip Space drives had accumulated enough charge to make a successful jump.

Thompson himself hefted a metal box, the very last of their gear, like a suitcase as he quickly moved to finally get aboard. A dozen plain-uniformed rebel personnel jogged around the hangar as the last flight checks were done.

"All personnel, report to your stations for the final phase. Repeat! All report to your final stations!"

Max truly had left their escape to the last minute. Gunfire began outside as their final line of defense came under attack. It wasn't long now.

Thompson quickly sprinted over to the boarding ramp of their craft. Max and at least a dozen Troopers were waiting at the very edge. While Max was unmoved the Troopers anxiously twitched. One rebel in heavy Orbital Shock armor carried a foreign heavy machine-gun, the one that had been labelled a M -76 'Revenant' Assault Rifle by ONI,

already slowly raising it to the entrance that linked the hangar to the rest of the base.

Max took a Handheld COM and gave the next set of instructions.

"Open the Hangar Doors. Prepare for immediate takeoff. Clear the sky," Max gave three simple commands. Underneath them, the engines whirled as they powered up. Above them, there was the grinding of metal as the doors above eased open. Hidden Viper Launchers buried into the side of the mountains finally exposed themselves, knocking the incoming wave of drones out of the sky. Further UNSC Air Forces that had thought the air defenses eliminated turned around and high-tailed it.

Finally, the doors broke and a squad of Spartans entered the hangar. Heavy emplacements on both sides of the Hangar Bay opened up, dust frayed up into the air where hundreds of high-calibre rounds landed. The Spartans slunk back outside the door, faced with overwhelming firepower.

The Landing Ramps raised themselves up, and soon, they couldn't hear the battle outside at all. Max frowned deeply, fiddling with a remote in his hands. The rumbling of the engines now turned into a roar, as the ship began to lift off.

"A few months ago, when you first told me about it all, I thought you were mad," Max suddenly told them. "If it wasn't from all the proof you had, I sure as hell wouldn't stick my neck like this. But here we are now."

Max mused on that for a bit, before activating the remote, triggering the remote detonators attached to the many, many cans of GKN-9 scattered throughout the base. A hot, non-flammable gas, but totally corrosive to both stone and metal. The metal decaying properties would erode even the Spartan's armor, would be the death of everyone inside this base today.

\* \* \*

><p>Saber Team had taken a different route than the conventional. While the Hangar itself was ventilated directly to the surface unlike the rest of the base, it still had structural weaknesses along the western and eastern walls. They had taken a small pack of the C-24 charges and pressed it against one of those aforementioned weaknesses.<p>

Judging by the sheer noise, their fellow Spartans could already be fighting their way into the hangar. If they activated the charges now, they could risk friendly fire, since their trackers were disabled. If there were innies on the other side though, this could be very rewarding indeed.

They had been strongly advised, against using explosives to destroy structural walls, since this base wasn't exactly hardened as a proper military installation should be. It was no underground fortress of Reach; immune to anything below orbital bombardment, and here, the removal of a few walls through concentrated explosions could cause a cave in.

Still, Ash judging it a worthy trade-off. They needed to deal with

the last few rebels and they couldn't wait. They needed to create a new route for them to flank the rebels hiding behind the stranglehold that was the hangar entrance. He motioned for Mark to detonate the charges.

The explosion was larger than the charges. On the other side of the wall, was a machine-gun emplacement that was laying cover fire down on the hangar entrance. The corridor was rocked, and the ceiling cracked. Saber Team didn't give them time to rest however, charging through the gap.

A bullet skimmed his helmet as he came through. Ash immediately opened fire on the few remaining Troopers who hadn't been caught by the explosion. With one of the two gun emplacements destroyed, fire on the entrance diminished to the point where a few Spartans could lean in and finally return fire.

At the center of the Hanger, was a strange Freighter, seemingly built custom by the rebels, like the makeshift attack vessels favored by raiders. This wasn't built for raiding however. It had bulky fuel tanks on both flanks, and was strangely constructed. Right now, it was lifting off. Brown gas was suddenly seeping through all corners of the room, confusing Spartan and rebel alike.

Could the Navy intercept it? Their Frigates couldn't get close without copping a few missiles, and if the ship did an in-atmosphere jump. In any situation, it couldn't be allowed to leave this facility.

He spotted the Rocket Boosters, temporary engines strapped onto ships to achieve vertical takeoff in atmosphere for ships that simply couldn't do it on their own. It was his obvious target. Ash targeted one of the boosters and began to unload his entire clip.

The brown gas began to lap at his feet, and Mark and Olivia disappeared off his HUD, but he didn't cease firing until the clip emptied. Ash ejected it, and quickly snapped in a new one. One of the eight Rocket Boosters on the side of the ship was now sparking heavily, and spluttering, slowing the freighter's ascent. Half way through the second clip, it gave out completely and caught alight.

Then his Assault Rifle jammed. Ash glared down at the weapon and saw it had suddenly accumulated a layer of rust, and so was his armor. The brown gas was all around them now, decaying their equipment. When it finally began to crack his armor, he felt the gas touch his skin, setting it aflame. He gritted his teeth in pain, but didn't stop. Their armor froze up, as if rusting, and soon, they couldn't move anywhere.

Ash tore his helmet from his head, forcing himself to bear the toxic gas that melted his skin. It burned painfully, but he ignored it. He pushed forward.

The use of the Rocket Boosters was either a great coincidence or a very smart move. The massive downflow of the Boosters kept the decay gas well away from the Rebel ship as it lifted off. Right now, the remaining rebel soldiers who hadn't been left behind were rolling around on the ground, screaming in pain. A few Spartans had fallen too, but lay in rotten armor silently.

Tearing a grenade from his satchel, the very skin of it rotting away as he touched it, he prepared to chuck it. His now decaying armor inhabited his throw, the armor alloy beginning to crack as if under the pressure of extreme heat, almost ready to shatter from pressure. Ash ignored it, looking to his target.

The vessel was now hovering above the hanger, at least a few hundred meters now. It's ascent was slow, but it mattered little. They were down here choking to death on toxin while those rocket batteries ward off any UNSC aircraft. Ash didn't care how impossible the task was, only that he had to do it. Adrenaline rushed through him as he pulled the pin and chucked it with all his fury.

The sheer pressure, his augmented strength, pushed his ruined amour beyond its limited endurance, the metal shattering around his arm. Some of it dug deep into the melted gel layer, some pierced his skin. The throw was sabotaged and the explosive fell short, hurtling up into the air but coming tumbling back down and simply exploding amongst a pile of dying rebels.

With the remains of his armor shattering around him like glass, the toxic swirled around him. His skin was dead, and all underneath was dying too. Many of his fellow Spartans had chosen to retreat, disappearing in the brown haze. Ash didn't move however, his mind gone. His anger was pushed to a new breaking limit. His illegal augmentations took over, his fury now completely in control. He wanted to tear that ship; now hovering just above them and readying to activate its own engines; out of the sky if it was the last thing he did.

He reached down and seized the second and last grenade in his satchel. A short touch revealed it still intact. Without pause, he repeated his earlier action. He took the grenade, activated it and pegged it with all the strength he did and didn't have. His augmentations pushed his body past its natural limit, his bones disconnecting and some shattering in half. He didn't falter for a second though, and the grenade left his hand exactly as intentioned.

What Ash once relied upon his armor for was replaced by his swirling rage. He didn't last any longer though. His strength gave out and his body finally acknowledged the amount of damage it had taken. He collapsed to his knees, and simply fell forward, unconscious.

The last thing he heard was a detonation.

\* \* \*

><p>Isaiah was coughing, almost near sputtering. His armor no longer worked, both broken and rotten around him. He shed it quickly as he could, as he stumbled away. For the first time he could remember, the Spartans of Gamma Company ran a full retreat. The base was a deathtrap, and the toxic gas inside shattered their gear and set their skin aflame.<p>

It also thankfully had reduced the insurgents to a state where they couldn't fight anymore too.

Back into natural light, Isaiah slumped down to his knees. His skin



was dead and already peeling, and only now could he start to breath again. As he recovered, he whirled around, looking in the skies. There was no aircraft, save a strange freighter that hovered somewhere up the unscalable mountain. That must have been the rebel ship mentioned.

It hung on Rocket Boosters that kept it afloat while its own aft mounted engines began to whirl to life. Suddenly, a detonation went off, an explosive just under one of the Rocket Boosters. The fuel caught alight, and the entire rocket exploding, causing a chain reaction of every rocket on the left side. The pilots must have attempted to disconnect the rockets early as soon as the first explosion, the boosters on the right side of the ship now twirling off into the sky, like out of control missiles.

It wasn't enough though, one of the rockets near the aft of the ship exploding and damaging the actual engines. With the Rocket Boosters keeping the ship ascending vertically gone, as well as a third of their own engine capability, the ship dipped and began to plummet out of the sky. It collided into the mountainside beginning to cart wheel downward. It proved more hardy than it looked, and survived the roll intact to come to a stop at the bottom of the mountain.

All that happened in under a minute. Isaiah still was kneeling, stunned by the events. The ship finally stopped moving, laying still amid crushed jungle not far from where they were at the entrance to the rebel base. Three dozen wounded Spartans watched on, their armor and weapons destroyed. Finally, they tore weapons from deceased rebel defenders and rallied together, now deprived of their armor but not their endurance.

Isaiah picked up a MA5C Carbine off a fallen innie, checking the weapon for the decay damage done by the bio-weapon. Thankfully it had none, and the weapon still worked perfectly fine. Without the SPI armor he had grown so accustomed to, he felt exposed, but that wouldn't stop him or any of them. The Spartans approached silently and fast, forsaking the brash rush tactics they had used earlier for a more quicker approach.

Quickly, the bullets began to fly.

\* \* \*

><p>In orbit over New Brandenburg, the UNSC Battle Fleet hung solemnly, waiting for their moment.<p>

On the bridge of the UNSC Idella, Agent Harrison waited anxiously. Admiral Belforn sat in the command chair, staring at the planet below in silence as if slowly mulling something over.

"Sir, groundside forces have confirmed that the rebel stronghold has been neutralized," an officer from Intel reported, causing the Admiral to stir. "They also confirm that the rebel ship has been stopped from leaving the atmosphere. All mission objectives have been completed."

"That's good to hear," Belforn nodded, standing up and strolling across the bridge. The Idella's AI, itself appearing as a Roman Centurion by the name of Domocos; spoke up.

"There is something that seems to be a chemical weapon that has been unleashed on the surface," Domocos told them. "An experimental gas known as GKN, mark nine, by ONI. It seems to have neutralized our ground forces equipment and inflicted some casualties."

Harrison shot Domocos a harsh glare. The AI had yet to give the thumbs up signal and now was only prattering out information that the Navy didn't need to know. Honestly, he thought about pressing ahead himself, but he remembered his orders. They weren't to initiate the scheme until Domocos gave the go ahead.

"Will there be any trouble?" the Admiral questioned, stepping back from the observation window and turning to face the AI.

"The battle has already been concluded by our ground side forces, Admiral," Domocos explained. "The gas is only a obstacle though... it seems to be accumulating at an alarming rate."

"Do you think its the reason why ONI-" Admiral Belforn gave no sign of acknowledgement to the spook on his bridge, "declared the evacuation?"

"I am not informed of such information, Admiral, but from I'm detecting, the rebel's may have more of this chemical weapon than we first thought," Domocos simply stated. "While the battle is over, it is most certainly wise to keep our weapons on stand-by. I am detecting quite some many anomalies..."

"If the battle is over and the rebel threat neutralized, then we should give the order to withdraw the ground forces," the Admiral declared.

"Not required, Admiral," Harrison finally spoke up. "Our men down there are fully equipped with the correct equipment to deal with chemical attacks. The nature of this chemical weapon, it would simply damage, even incapacitate any transports we send to unnecessarily evacuate them. It is best that we stand by until the chemical dissipates in a number of hours."

Belforn didn't respond to that, only nodding.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Authors Afterward:<strong>

\*\*There it is, Chapter Five. Yea, it was a long wait. Yea, even I struggled to finish this by the deadline I set for today, Sunday. I originally wanted to wrap up the whole New Brandenburg thing in one chapter, but this chapter has passed ten thousand words and Sunday is almost over. Taking in some reviewer critique, I rewrote half of the chapter to remove some of the chapter's worser elements.\*\*

\*\*While this chapter after the first segment was almost purely battle, it carries out the beginning of a very important series of events. A tri-set of blockages have prevented me from continuing. Actually getting around to typing out the Battle of New Brandenburg to the point where it would come to the conclusion I wanted it to was difficult. That's one of them, but I've also had trouble writing both the ME and the Spartan V segments, both due to the fact I don't really know how to write the characters just yet.\*\*

**\*\*It's really just a problem in Act I. Most of the interesting cross-universe intrigue (the real interesting meat of the story) vanishes up until the beginning of Act II. There is also a significant time gap between Act I and II that's hammering me on how to work all the elements in with. I can't cut it out, because its crucial to understanding the later events of Act II and beyond.**

**\*\***

**\*\*But, blocks aside, I've got this past me. I hope you enjoyed Chapter Five. \*\***

## 10. VI - Ghosts of Hades

**\*\*Chapter VI: Ghosts of Hades\*\***

**\* \* \***

><p><strong> Hard to see big picture behind pile of corpses - Professor Mordin Solus<strong>

**\* \* \***

><p><em><em>Communication Channel Epsilon, Forward  
55462G7<br>Classification Level: Omega\_\_

\_\_Receiver: Rear Admiral Anthony Curtyn\_\_

>Note: Forwarded herein is a letter intercepted from an illegal vessel seized in transit. We believe it's destination was Venezia, but that is unconfirmed. The ship and all its crew have been destroyed. We have yet to determine the sender, receiver or if there are multiple copies of this letter. Make what you will from the message itself. <em>\_\_

\_\_MESSAGE: \_\_

\_\_Dear Uncle\_\_

\_\_I know it's been quite some while since I last wrote. Things changed. I'd hoped that one day you'd find it within you to forgive my father for his actions. By now, I'm sure you would have found the data he sent you. Believe me, he is not a madman. Everything he discovered is true. It's exactly why he was assassinated by the Office. It's the reason for New Brandenburg. \_\_

\_\_The galaxy is vast and things are happening that we cannot even get a glimpse of, let alone fathom. All of it is hidden from us by the dictatorship. We pride ourselves from escaping the days when the nations controlled the citizen's every opinion, yet as it turns out, we're possibly the most deluded and deceived generation ever to exist. We might as well be that northern nation from five centuries ago, divided from our own people and tricked into thinking that no civilization existed beyond our borders, only enemies.

><em>

\_\_This is why I implore you to continue his work. What is within that data you hold may be what brings freedom to a hundred worlds.\_\_

\_Love, your niece. \_

\* \* \*

><p><em>"<em>In retrospect, do you think things could have turned out differently?" he asked. A muffled bang and a Human's head exploded. The mercenary collapsed to the ground, his head now nothing more than smouldering flesh. His killer from across the alleyway, perched up atop an apartment block, began the search for the next target. He wanted to make short work of this and get off this cold Omega rooftop.

"Maybe," the Spectre replied, adjusting the silenced rifle. "Maybe it I'd stayed around, but no, I ran away."

"That's maybe more judgemental than necessary," Bau commented. Garrus pulled the trigger and another mercenary dropped dead.

"I should have done something," Garrus answered. "I should have joined Shepard straight after that Council meeting. I should have forgot the Council and stood by him. But no, I kept silent and I let him get himself killed. It's was my fault. Worse yet, I ran. Left everyone else."

"It's been six years," Bau told him.

"And it still hurts," Garrus said, squeezing the trigger. The projectile was soundless, cutting straight through the mercenary's shield and helmet. A small burst of red blood before he fell. Garrus ejected the heat sink, reloading the rifle. The front of the Omega warehouse was clear of guards now. Taking out the small time mercenary gang was trivial to him. They weren't even a challenge.

"I'm picking up no more heat signatures," Bau commented. "We're clear to move in."

Garrus slung the rifle over his shoulder and they slid down the side of the building they'd set up on. It now was a simple matter of crossing the alleyway and walking up to the front door. They had targeted this small Omega warehouse only a few days ago and the light security only made them wary. Both Spectres swapped their weapons for sub-machine guns.

"One inside," Bau told him. "We'll want him alive of course."

"No trouble," Garrus answered, backing him up. They always made a good team, but it'd been a while since they'd fought together. It just brought up old wounds in both of them. The Turian kicked in the door and they just marched into the tiny warehouse. A Human cowering behind some crates stumbled back, almost collapsing out of shock. Leaping over the crates, Garrus seized him around the neck before he could find a weapon. Bau moved up behind him, scanning the warehouse for anything unexpected. The man they'd captured just looked stunned, staring straight into Garrus's jet black visor.

"I'm not patient," Garrus told the prisoner. "Just give us what we want. Who do you work for?"

"Cerberus!" the man shouted.

"Join the club," Garrus said, "you and every other bit criminal between here and Earth. Cerberus is dead and buried. Do you really think that you can convince us that a small fish like you is Cerberus? Tell us who you really are!"

"I swear, that's it!" the man shouted, panicking. "I'm not lying! Just don't hurt me!"

"I think he's telling the truth," Bau commented, kicking a nearby crate to roll it. On the front, a faded Cord-Hislop logo. Garrus scowled.

"If you want to live," Garrus told him, "you'll tell us you report to and where we can find him."

"I don't know, I just was told to ship these things! I-"

"As matter of fact, I'm right here," a voice called out. An orange blur walked out of thin air, a hologram from a projector mounted above. He was man shaped but his exact features were concealed. His voice was almost what Garrus would identify as the 'southern drawl', or that's at least what his translator made it out to be.

"Spectres. You've been quite a thorn in my operation."

"Can't get a trace," Bau said, activating his OMNI-Tool.

"You can say I'm very illusive," the orange man smugly stated. "An Illusive Man as matter of fact. I won't be found so easily."

"The real Illusive Man died a decade ago," Garrus said, levelling his Locust SMG at the hologram. "All you are? A wannabe."

"A wannabe that has eluded you for a year, Spectre Vakarian," the Illusive Man said. "Cerberus is not so easily quashed as you believe. I concocted this non-existent operation here on Omega purely to get you off my trail and where I want you. You've taken down several facilities, dozens of operatives and even our Frigate, the Franica. You make quite a dent."

"I wouldn't describe that rust bucket as a frigate," Garrus commented.

"Laugh now, Turian, but you'll see the way of your errors soon enough," the Illusive Man stated. "This isn't your age of heroes any longer. Spectres are becoming quite the obsolete relic. On the path to disbandment I believe?"

"Cerberus is more than a relic itself," Garrus answered. "Give it up. You're finished."

"As matter of fact, I've only just begun," the Illusive Man stated. As Garrus held his attention, Bau had moved aside and began tearing of the crates open, pouring out white pellets. The Salarian went through them. "We're back, and stronger than ever. But conflict isn't what I desire between us. We have a similar enemy."

"I couldn't think of a more despicable kind than yourself," Garrus told him. "Reviving one of the most infamous terrorist organization's

and all."

"The Leviathans," the Illusive Man claimed. That got his attention. "They continue to lurk in the shadows while you stand about without a clue. You've failed to find any evidence of them since Shepard, haven't you?"

"What do you know about them?" Garrus questioned.

"Only that they're closer than you realize. Events are happening that the Council can't even fathom. They're on the move. I've met them myself. The only goal they have is subjection of the entire cosmos. Cerberus are patriots in this matter. Unless the rest of the galaxy, we won't just sit down and let the Leviathans take control of us."

"Like your predecessor, you're only indoctrinated," Garrus stated. "Ever considered that?"

"We could both be," the Illusive Man said. "But we're made of stronger mettle than that, both of us. I've got plans, Spectre. As I've said, I met the Leviathans. They've told me the most interesting of things. Things I couldn't possibly imagine. There is something coming for us all, something that will finally bring an end to Council domination. As proof of this, the Leviathans were kind enough to extend a gift of friendship. It's in the crate most further left, Salarian."

Bau pulled the crate open and reached in. Out of it came a data pad like device.

"Goodbye, Spectres. Tell the Council that Humanity is striking back." The Illusive Man disappeared. Beeping began from the projector above.

"Out now!" Garrus shouted, grabbing the Cerberus mook and dragging him out of the structure. By time they were out the door, the projector exploded into a hail of metal fragments. The warehouse caught on fire as they leaped out of the flames. It went up in an inferno, burning all the contents within. Garrus lifted himself up.

"I've still got the data pad," Bau commented, holding the device up. "The design is completely unknown to me. What about him?"

Garrus looked to the young man he still held firmly around the shoulder. He thought about it for a moment, then decided.

"Get out of here," Garrus shoved him forward. "Don't ever think of crossing us again or next time you won't be so lucky."

Before he knew it, their prisoner had fled out of the alleyway as fast as his legs could carry him. Some low level fall guy wouldn't ever be trouble.

"Not so much the Archangel any more, are you?" Bau commented.

"Mercy has its time and place," Garrus answered. "What have we got?"

Bau activated the data pad, scanning over what was on the memory card inside. "The biggest file here is some kind of galactic map. I'll have to scan it later to figure out just what it means."

"Whatever it is, it's just more trouble," Garrus stated. "Let's get back to the ship."

\* \* \*

><p>They'd started their return to the Citadel a few days later. Along the way, Bau had taken the map file and inserted it into their ship's own projector. He discovered the data that their Illusive pretender had wanted to pass on. It was all quite an intriguing mystery.<p>

"Three quarters of the worlds on this map don't exist," Bau told him. "Not on any of our records. In fact, many are situated a distance that is beyond our reach in the first place."

"So what do you think it means?" Garrus asked.

"Leviathan worlds?" Bau speculated. "I can't think of anything else these would be. Nothing else notable lies beyond the Mass Relays."

"Anything else on the memory chip?"

"No, nothing," Bau told him. "The rest are just files the map is drawing upon. I'll show you something stranger though."

Bau outlined a certain section of the galaxy map and brought it up alongside another. To Garrus, it looked like Bau had two copies of the same system up on screen. "See these two systems? They match perfectly. Down to the most tiny detail. One is nearby Omega and the other is in this uncharted region on the other side of the galaxy. This looks like it was just a duplication.

"So you doubt it?" Garrus questioned.

"Anyone can make a map like this," Bau told him. "I'm sure if I studied further, maybe I could find more copy and paste efforts. The only reason why I noticed that one, was because it was the system we investigated a few months ago for Cerberus activity. It leans towards the theory this map isn't what it is at face value. Maybe not a chart of locations, but something much more puzzling."

"Can you bring up a comparison to our own references?" Garrus asked, tuning the controls. He opened their own galaxy map with dozens of notes attached to various systems. Overlaying the two maps, some of the systems matched.

"Then overlay recent anomalies," Bau added. They searched the map for something that linked and eventually Garrus spotted where one of these non existent systems matched the speculated location of an anomaly.

"Here," Garrus said.

"Bekistan University recorded an unusual plasma formation while researching that cluster," Bau stated. "Something to do with the

Leviathans?"

"It's a link," Garrus stated. "We can find further things from there. Perhaps find something out from this."

"For now, I better finally file a report for the Council," Bau said. "What's more important than this chart is that Cerberus is centralizing again. Perhaps now they might take notice of our work."

They certainly had gone unnoticed. Ever since the Leviathan incident, the Spectres hadn't reacted, only just gone about on a usual campaign throughout Council space and beyond. They'd countered the usual rift raft of dangerous individuals as well as the resurgence of many organizations, Cerberus included. The supremacist group didn't die with it's founder sadly. Remnants of the Illusive Man's army continued to exist in scattered pockets across the galaxy and it wasn't long until many copy-cat terrorists appeared.

There was still many Sanctuary deniers. Someone had conveniently destroyed the planet before anyone came back to record hard evidence after the war. So people continued to attribute it to the Reapers rather than Cerberus, who slipped away. All sorts of conspiracies were drummed up to excuse them for many of the war crimes attributed to them, such as the Citadel attack. The Reaper War had permanently scarred civilization and left resources scarce. Many tensions existed over which worlds received priority in the reconstruction efforts. The Wards of the Citadel were still yet to be properly made habitable again. Beyond Earth, many of the colonies drifted into an opinion that they'd be better off without the System's Alliance that was taking their resources for efforts off world. Those separatist elements had manifested as a new Cerberus.

Personally, Garrus just got ever more tired. He was sick of the fighting and especially putting down remnants of an organization that should have ended years ago. Even with the Intel of the Shadow Broker and other sources, they'd never pinned down every last stronghold. It interested him how a new Illusive Man had managed to slip past Liara entirely. Her updates had grown fewer and fewer over the years, more so after Shepard.

They'd all grown further apart after Shepard.

\* \* \*

><p>The Citadel was a shadow of its former self as it rested again at the heart of the Widow Nebula. The Praesidium was no longer shining, but grey concrete and dusty fields. When the Reapers had attacked, they'd simply blasted their way in and released all the artificial atmosphere, killing everything. They hardly had the resources to spare on much of a reconstruction effort here. Minor attempts had been made to restore the gardens, but they were still minor patches.<p>

The people hadn't come back either. Those who'd escaped the Reaper's assault never returned. What was once the bustling home to countless members of all species was just home to the Council, the embassies and a handful of support staff. There was few visitors time to time, but nothing that brought back the majestic atmosphere of old. In a way, it was just a symbol of how wounded the galaxy still was.



The Keepers were still about, back to their old selves as they took to repairing the damage. They'd brought the Citadel back to the Widow Nebula after the Battle of Earth, dragging the Citadel through some strange dimension. Now they just watched and waited. Attempts to have them culled got nowhere so nothing more was tried to remove the former servants of the Reapers from the station.

They'd returned to the Council Chambers and a debriefing by the Council. The entire floor was empty save a handful of C-Sec officers standing guard. The Council was waiting within.

"We'll leave it to the STG to find what they will from this data," the Salarian Councillor stated. "The more pressing issue is this new Illusive Man, not figuring out his puzzles that are most likely an attempt to deceive us."

"Agreed," the Turian Councillor said. "We shouldn't waste our time. What matters is that we cleanse ourselves of this menace before it grows out of hand again."

"What's more important Councillors, is the Leviathans," Garrus pointed out.

"We've already dismissed the theory," the Salarian Councillor said, folding his arms. "There has been no trace of them all these years. All I think is that they've been cited as purely another distraction. Cerberus merely wants our attention elsewhere and they are desperate to do it."

"The data pad however," Councillor Dominic Osoba commented, "is not of any known design. It's certainly Human made however though the components I find strange."

"Cerberus has always had an obsession with their own brand," the Turian Councillor dismissed it. "No doubt they are still in the business of manufacturing their own hardware."

"Indeed, it may be proof that our investigations haven't been deep enough," the Asari Councillor stated. "We all know that Cerberus cannot be anything but a threat. Thus we must expand our search to discover their remnants."

"You've already turned every stone!" Councillor Osoba complained, turning to his fellow Councillors. "Cerberus is a menace yes, but the System's Alliance cannot tolerate any more investigations. So far, they've discovered nothing and only delayed our efforts to rebuild our colonies."

"The fact we haven't found anything only proves we aren't looking hard enough," the Turian Councillor said. "Would you rather we turned a blind eye?"

"No, but -"

"Then we must continue investigating," the Salarian Councillor concluded. Osoba sighed, withdrawn. "As for you Spectres, you should continue your efforts amongst the Traverse. Leave analysing Intel to the STG. Understood."

"We understand, Councillors," Bau answered. With the meeting concluded, they departed the Council Chambers. Garrus didn't have the willpower any more to argue this out with the Council. It was better they just continued and got to the root of it themselves, with support or no support. Each day, he maybe just lost more willpower to do even that.

As he left for the elevators, he ran into someone.

"Garrus," Tali called out. She approached, accompanied by a blue armoured Geth.

"Tali," Garrus answered. "Good to see you."

"You too," Tali told him. Her voice was unfamiliar in a way. There was no longer that spark of energy or any happiness. It was rather more drawl and had been for quite a while. "You're no doubt busy on your Spectre work."

"Just finished a debriefing," Garrus replied. "We should catch up later. Haven't done that for a year. What are you here for now?"

"It's mainly not to do with Rannoch itself, but the Geth are in need of something," Tali explained.

"We Geth seek to reclaim munitions and arms lost in the Reaper-Wars, Spectre-Vakarian," the Geth Ambassador stated. "Much hardware was lost across Council space and we are wary of its misuse. Since we've concluded our reconstruction efforts, we now have the resources to undertake the salvaging operations. There may be platforms stranded and unable to communicate with us. Tali'Zorah is here to assist us with her support."

For the past few years, Tali had continued her work representing the Quarians on the Citadel. From the war itself, she actually knew more about dealing with other species than the isolated Quarian leadership did. Plus, she still had the respect of a well known veteran of the Reaper Wars and respect for Quarians was something the galaxy still had very little of. Garrus knew too there was the top reason of them all that the Conclave could rid themselves of her and get one more Admiral as far away from Rannoch as possible. He never voiced it, but it always hurt him that she'd never lived her dream of settling on her home world.

Political problems weren't just exclusive to Rannoch. While the Krogan had made serious gains, they'd still gained little legitimacy amongst the old prejudices of the Citadel Council. The Batarians warred with each other thanks to Alliance meddling. The Rachni had been denied representation on the Citadel altogether and they'd been forced to retreat into uncharted space to avoid genocide by those who still considered them Reaper abominations or believed they needed to be put down before they became a problem again.

"The Conclave has not exactly treated the Geth well," Tali told him. "It's the same old problems. They themselves have refused to allow the Geth to salvage from amongst that land we've settled. I repay that here with at least helping them gain access to salvage elsewhere."

"The lost platforms need to be reunited with the Geth," the Ambassador stated, its eye flaps lifting up. "They have much data we are in need of."

"Come by in a few hours," Tali told him. "We should catch up, for old times sake."

She walked passed him, and Garrus stepped into the elevator. Old times sake isn't what it used to be.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterword:<strong>

**\*\*I can't apologize enough for the wait it has been. Two things, bad news and good news. Bad news is that the document containing the entire plot of the story was lost. The good news is that the document containing the entire plot of the story was lost. I only half remember it. What was holding me back before was that I didn't feel like writing the chapters I'd planned. Now that I've come back and been liberated from writing within that set plan, things can move on.\*\***

**\*\*I've had a lot of writing practice since more than six months ago. Hopefully, chapters can become more frequent than every six months and this story can get rolling again. While this chapter may seem weak, I'm just trying to get used to this story again. The style I previously wrote in might have dissolved a bit. Also, it's a Mass Effect chapter, which are frankly hard to write since I have to keep every character in the dark from what is really going on. A benefit of loosing the planned setup is now I can fast track this story to the exciting bits such as the return of a mysterious new Cerberus. Who do they bat for? Leviathans? ONI? Themselves? Only time will tell... \*\***

## 11. VII - Isolation Policy

**\*\*Chapter VII: Isolation Policy\*\***

\* \* \*

><p><strong> "Do you ever wonder what's up there?"<strong>

**\*\*"Like what?"\*\***

**\*\*"Maybe someone up there is probably wondering what it's like here."\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>Gamma Company had slowly regrouped, highly battered and bruised but victorious. The rebel stronghold had fallen and the ship taken out of the sky. It was the next part of the plan which was going to be the most tricky. Forty Spartans with still intact armour were assigned to dragging the rebel ship out of the jungle and onto the clear landing strip nearby with the help of some Warthogs. It was a hard job, but they managed to do it.<p>

They numbered only a hundred now. Forty more were severely injured

and some even maimed, losing arms and legs. They had been gathered together in a triage area where their fellow Spartans worked to apply bio-foam to their injuries. Thankfully, one of Gamma's merits was that they were made for deployment as a company rather than just squads, thus amongst the company there were those who'd received specialist training in treating severe injuries in the field. Sadly, only one of the company medics was still alive today.

G-164 Reece had foregone armour to another squad member who was busy working on the ship, and now she was constantly going back and forth treated wounded Spartans in overalls as well as a plain leather jacket nicked from a fallen rebel. Night was falling and a deep cold was coming to replace the scorching heat of the day. Kelly watched on, seeing Reece handle so many wounds. Bio-Foam was running low and they certainly wouldn't have enough. Some squads were already bitterly mumbling about the lack of evac and why they were still here watching their comrades die.

The Falcons that had brought them in no longer responded and everything else had dropped off the radar. Time was running out and Kelly didn't know how longer they could delay. Someone must be stalling for time since they weren't dead yet.

"Scimitar Team, report."

"We've reached the southern end of the base, encountering light resistance," Isaiah called from the other end of the radio. "We've managed to commandeer eight Pelicans from enemy hands. They're undamaged and ready to go."

"That's the best news all day, Scimitar," Kelly responded, looking at the air around them. She thanked existence for small miracles. The bio-weapon had dispersed now, allowing them to actually escape. "Get your Spartans aboard and fly them to the southern end of the landing strip. Get the wounded loaded ASAP."

Good, commandeering the rebel's own vehicles would take so much burden off what they needed to do now. They had to get the rebel ship that had just fallen out of the sky flying again. Like all vessels designed to survive in vacuum, it was significantly tough and it had survived the fall with only minor damage and minus the entire crew. Gamma Company had finished dragging it onto the air strip and began repair operations as instructed. It wasn't designed to take out like a conventional aircraft, but with clever use of the remaining rocket pods, they could get this thing off the ground.

"You're going to have to operate on them later," Kelly told Reece. "Evacuation is coming."

"Yes, Ma'am," Reece answered, wrapping the arm of a fallen member of Saber team with bandages. All the skin had melted away. Thankfully he'd live. "Permission to speak, ma'am?"

"Granted."

"Where exactly are we evacuating to? You've already told me we aren't returning to the fleet," Reece questioned. "Some of them will not survive without operations we can only do with the proper equipment."

"We're evacuating elsewhere," Kelly told her, glad nobody could see behind the visor. She gritted her teeth. "I'm afraid your going to have to make do with what you have here."

"Yes, ma'am," Reece answered.

The Pelicans appeared on the horizon now, in the grey-green colours of the Brandenburg Liberation Army. They set down on the far end of the runway and everything started to get under way. The work teams dragging the ship had returned and about eighty Spartans assembled.

"Alright, everyone!" Kelly shouted. "Listen up! This is what we need to do. We need to get that freighter up into orbit, and we're going to have no help from the fleet to do it. That thing is going to fly and we're going to follow behind in with the Pelicans."

"With all due respect, commander," the assigned leader of the work teams, G-028 Hammad spoke up. "That ship has been heavily damaged. Only five of the rocket pods still work, and you'd need twelve to get a proper lift off. It's not going anywhere."

"That's why it's on the landing strip," Kelly explained. "It's not going to go straight up, it's going to climb like an the old conventional aircraft we had a few centuries ago. Scrap the fifth pod and put two on the back and front. Angle them so that we can just get the lift necessary to point the freighter skyward. Then all the we need to do is fly out of here on the freighter's own engines. Forty will be aboard and the rest will follow behind in the Pelicans. Do you understand that? Get on it!"

They didn't need to ask any more questions. They returned to the freighter now and began removing the rocket pods and then putting them into the necessary positions. With them balanced out, they could get a stable lift and tilted to the right degree, they should be able to got hurtling down this runway to either take off or certain death. It would be worth it though, because the only alternative was failure and death anyway.

There was a coming fire on the horizon. New Brandenburg was burning as the Navy dropped MAC strikes down on the planet they orbited. They needed to get out of here fast.

"Move it! Move it! Get to your positions!" Kelly continued to shout. They'd gotten the rocket boosters secured now, working with commandeered power tools from the nearby hangers. The Pelicans were ready to take off behind them. All that was left now was launch. Once every team leader gave the green signal, they got under way. "Take off."

In the end, she'd only placed twenty Spartans on the freighter, the left overs from those who couldn't fit on the Pelicans. This take off was going to be risky. The piloting Spartan activated the rocket boosters and the ship shuddered. They weren't enough to lift the freighter off the landing strip and the ship shuddered.

"Begin the tilt," Kelly commanded. The engines were slowly rotated, and the freighter began skidding along the runway. "Now, give a bit of power to our engines."

The powerful freighter engines activated, enough power to send them hurtling through space. At a mere hundredth of their power, they were sent thundering down the runway. The rocket boosters were pointed forward, pushing the freighter off the ground and moving the nose upward. Slowly, they were able to slowly angle upward, lifting off. Well, it all turned out better than expected but it was no easy ride. The ship continued to shudder as it took off and narrowly avoided crashing into the jungle at the end of the runway. The flight of Pelicans followed behind them as they boosted up into the atmosphere.

"Open this COM channel," Kelly ordered, transferring the numbers. The team working to pilot the freighter opened the channel.

"\_Spartan-087\_," an AI spoke through the channel. "\_Good work on successfully retrieving the rebel vessel. I am taking remote control from here to bring it to the desired slip space coordinates. Disable the ship's security protocols." \_

They quickly worked on the console and opened the ship's network to the outside. Immediately, the unidentified AI took charge and began accelerating the freighter away from New Brandenburg; a world burning behind them.

\_"Pelican Pilots," \_The AI instructed, \_"Bring your craft into this approximate radius of the Freighter. I am expanding our shielding to allow you to piggy back off this ship through Slip Space." \_

The Pelican fleet behind them formed up and carefully took their place alongside the Freighter, brushing up as close as they could. Inside the freighter's shields, they wouldn't get torn apart or lost in the void of Slip Space. As soon as they were all within the radius safely, their AI controller activated the shielding and spun up the Slip Space drive. Soon, the portal appeared before them and they slipped inside and away from the storm.

\* \* \*

><p>On the bridge of the Idella, Admiral Belforn scowled at the planet below as another MAC strike was launched. It fell to the planet below and impacted with the force of ten megatons. There had already been about seventy strikes, each adding more and more damage to the planet.<p>

"Confirmed hit," his weapon's officer reported. "Rebel target destroyed. Proceeding to next target"

Belforn rubbed the stubble underneath his chin, not able to pin down just how wrong this was. He thought he'd left the days of being left in the dark when he was only a captain. The Admiralty deserved to know what was going on. The way ONI had been holding all the cards over the years had made them ever more uneasy. It just got worse and worse until now he had no clue to what he was shooting at.

"Domocos, do you have any visual on this rebel targets?" Belforn questioned.

"Negative, sir," the AI centurion answered. "They are concealed targets. We're purely targeting them on the Intel provided to us by

Intelligence."

"What's just the source behind this Intel of theirs?" the Admiral questioned.

"Sir?" Domocos queried.

"I said, where are they getting that Intel?" Belforn repeated.

"Unknown, but obviously, these are observations by ground side forces," Domocos told him.

"Sir, we have visual on rebel ships!" an officer reported. "We have confirmed sighting of a freighter and a number of BLA Pelicans!"

"Bring it on screen," the Admiral commanded and the enhanced visuals of the escaping rebel fleet appeared. "Get our fighters on them immediately."

"Longsword Squadrons are pursuing," a bridge officer informed him. "The freighter is jumping to Slip Space, Admiral. We won't be able to intercept."

"Can you plot a trajectory, Dom?" Belforn questioned. The AI blazed with red light.

"Destination unknown, sir," the AI answered. "That trajectory can only take them beyond UNSC space."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>5th August, 2576 (UNSC Standard Military Calendar)<strong>

"We have problems," Admiral Curtyn told her as he walked into the office. "Serious problems."

"Do we?" Parangosky asked, looking up from the papers she held. It was late night, and the shutters had closed, leaving the office only illuminated by a desk lamp. Curtyn took a seat across from the CINCONI.

"I've forwarded you the letter," Curtyn said. Parangosky slowed placed the papers down on the table and stared at him.

"I read the sentimental piece," Parangosky told him. "Very touching in its points, but a divided Korea we are not. As far as I'm concerned, the new chief of the Prowler Corps assures me that no insurrectionist ships have reached Venezia in the past few months. Our invisible blockade is intact as far as I know."

"The danger is that the letter infers that they've already received data," Curtyn pointed out. "That very special type of sensitive data."

"Now, that very special type of data has found its way Venezia," Parangosky said, crossing her frail arms. "Maybe I misjudged replacing you. That data should have never left New

Brandenburg."

"New Brandenburg was four years ago," Curtyn pointed out.

"Secrets never die," Parangosky answered. "It doesn't matter if it was a thousand years ago. There are always loose ends. We do our best to tie most of them. With this however, we have been too slack. From what I read from the Brandenburg debriefings, that data is no doubt even more diluted now. It's likely that even Venezia considers the concept of another Human empire a myth. Do you advise any options?"

"Save invading the planet?" Curtyn said.

"Not on the table, I'm afraid," Parangosky replied. "It's only survived so long from the wooden top navy because of those leeching media idiots. It's only survived from us so long because we have all our worst enemies right where we can see them. We've built on that for years. Ironically, a citizen of Venezia is monitored a hundred times more so than anyone in the whole of UNSC space. We see every last bit of data there and no monitor has reported anything from the watch list."

"They possess the power to make something of this data though, even if it's just on pieces of paper," Curtyn said. "Work with it? Sell it to the Kig-Yar?"

"Kig-Yar nationalism is out of hand as it is, I admit," Parangosky agreed. "The last thing we need is the former Covenant states joining the Citadel Council block. That would be a disaster beyond control. It's an unlikely scenario however. Venezia and the Republic of Eayn are firmly under our watch and there is no possibility of an expedition getting out without mysteriously suffering a Slip Space malfunction. Thank the lord for Prowlers."

"Section Three has already drawn up contingency plans," Curtyn said. "In case it does happen however."

"I'm sure Admiral Rich has many good ideas," Parangosky said, a cruel smile appearing on her face. "I'm sure he has plenty of time to make contingency plans from where he is now."

Curtyn did his best not to react to that. Somebody must have caught on about something because for the past few years, Admiral Rich had been stuck on ONI's flagship project, far away from any civilization. Parangosky might have thrown him into a cell for all intents and purposes. The only time he wasn't on that non-existent shipyard was when he was observing the progress of the Spartan program on Trevelyan.

"It's become visible to me that these plans more and more are beginning to include the deployment of our Spartan corps?" Parangosky questioned.

"Yes, you would have seen that the program is proceeding at the desired speed," Curtyn replied. "Rich tells us that they'll be ready for deployment in a maximum of six years. Meanwhile, we've finally suspended. No more new Spartan IV's. They'll stay as a force of two thousand only. That era is over."



"The galaxy moves too fast these days," Parangosky mused. "I'd ask him cutting that estimate down to four years at the rate things are going. We aren't doing enough to quash this threat. If I could turn back time, Anthony, when you asked me for close up surveillance, I should have slapped you. Would have saved me so much trouble. You should now consider it your top priority to fix this mess from your position in Section Three. The ideal solution is zero contact, not even from us here at ONI. That's why now I am going to order you to return this order to Section Three.

Destroy all technological samples. Clean slate all artificial intelligences and wipe the memories of all staff who have ever come into contact with Relay Space materials or Intel. From here forward, the Shield World shall be sealed completely and the Spartan program shall proceed in isolation. Anyone outside of ONI who even has the faintest clue of Relay space needs termination, immediately."

\* \* \*

><p>"Give us lights," Tammerson instructed and Ann flicked on the ceiling lights high above them. From their observation post on the side, the sealed warehouse beyond the protective glass was now illuminated. Halsey stood beside the chief instructor, watching on as the first round was due to start.<p>

At the centre of the warehouse was a bunker, guarded by an eighteen strong platoon of Thor Droids a buffer and more heavily armed version of Loki Droid. The heavy weapons platforms had seen use in the Asari space during the Reaper invasion. Equipped with in-built Reverent Machine Guns, they could apparently make short work of even the toughest Reaper troops though in reality, they never had much success and were just too costly to construct. These machines weren't to be trifled however with and unlike all tests before this, they weren't playing around. These machines would shoot and hit hard, with countless stun ammunition in those assault rifles.

Not that it worried anybody but Ann, who never stopped finding reasons to disapprove of this exercise. Tammerson was totally confident in his recruits and Halsey didn't even need to bother to worry. Her Spartan II's could have cleared the room of these overweight robots within seconds. All they needed was a good push for the Thor's to loose their balance.

"The test begins now," Tammerson spoke into the loudspeaker. The THOR droids began their patrol routine, eight circling around the bottom of the bunker while another eight stood guard on top, keeping over-watch. Tammerson was surprised when Halsey requested of that the Engineers make this space without rafters. It eliminated the one route that the Spartan II's had taken the most advantage of. If these Spartans were to survive, they would need to find their own paths and not just mimic their predecessors.

Ann's holographic form wandered about the control room, looking at the monitors. There was still no sight of anything after ten seconds elapsed.

"Think its too challenging, Ann?" Tammerson asked the AI.

"My concern primarily is for the possibility of a failed exercise," Ann answered. "Are heavy machine guns necessary this early on in the

program? No Spartan before has faced such a dangerous test at such an early age."

"Well, I think the stock answer there, is that they aren't like any Spartans who've gone before," Tammerson replied, smiling. "Twenty seconds now."

The AI Hades who controlled the droid team grew restless at the lack of finding a threat. Perfectly synchronized patrols covering all angles continued to find nothing and the AI who looked like some medieval Eastern European prince materialized to laugh.

"I believe I'm too good for this crowd," Hades claimed. "There's zero percent of them approaching unseen."

Finally, there was an audible crack and the lights above the bunker went out. Hades spun around and the droids continued their patrol patterns, switching sensor modes. They continued to circle the bunker, always facing outwards with rifles raised.

"I'm in agreement," Ann spoke up, "there is no chance of an approach that does not result in termination. There is no chance of avoiding a direct approach. This exercise is futile unless defeat is the desired result."

"Just wait," Halsey told the AI.

A cluster of grenades flew down from the sky and landed amongst the Thor droids, detonating in a thunderous explosion. The droids emerged unscathed asides from minor damage and the collapse of their shield units, unmoved. What they missed however, was how it blinded them to what was above. Four blurs landed after the grenades, right into the centre of the bunker top. The eight Thor's immediately spun around, but they were rammed into, thrown from the bunker top onto the dirt far below. The drop broke them.

A mixed team consisting of a Salarian, Bartarian and two Quarrians immediately went prone on the bunker top as Hades had four of the machines turn to fire on the bunker while the other four continued to keep outwards watch. Unable to hit the bunker team, the Thor's back-pedalled away from the bunker and ran right into the trap. A hailstorm of rocks suddenly came over the nearby hill, bombarding the Thor's from behind. The chunks of stone bounced off the shields, but the Thor's spun around, Hades aware of the Spartan's position.

Choosing an offensive strategy, the AI had the killing machines scatter. It was too late now, because with that distraction, the Spartans on the bunker salvaged the heavy machine guns from the fallen machines. Two pairs handled a machine gun each, laying down suppressing fire on the Thor's below from the top of the bunker. The fire-fight continued, the Thor's still unable to hit the prone bunker team.

They were facing the wrong way now, because a Human Spartan suddenly appeared behind one Thor and stabbed a combat knife into the machine's core, scrambling the electronics inside. Before the machine's partner could bring its own weapon to bear, its fallen compatriot was suddenly lifted into the air. The Thor was chucked by an invisible force and crashed into its comrade, taking both machines

out of the fight.

There was only six machines left standing now and too many angles to cover with the bunker in the midst of them. Two Spartans, the knife wielder and his Biotic comrade, took cover behind the fallen machines as Hades grew furious with the ever growing chances of defeat. He had his machines go back to back, all six of them facing out. Together with their combined fire power, two kept the team on the bunker pinned while the other four searched for targets. They moved out from the bunker and into the open.

Covered by shields, they were immune to Biotic attacks. The mechanical phalanx stood firm as more salvaged Reverent machine guns were fired down from the bunker. The machines were being worn down though.

"Permission to change the rules, instructor?" Hades asked Tammerson. The chief nodded.

"Surprise em."

A Thor outstretched its arm and an OMNI Tool flared to life. An electronic burst shot out, taking the nearest Turian down with a stun charge. Another machine sprinted around the Bunker, running as fast as a Warthog as it sprayed bullets. The eight Thor's that had fallen from the bunker earlier reactivated and stood up, battered but still intact. Now with fourteen machines in the fight, the rules had changed.

The Spartans reacted quickly though, not giving time for the machines to reform their perfect defence. They descended from the south side of the bunker, smashing into the droid's still finding their way up. The Biotic was no longer pinned down, standing up and throwing up a barrier that covered them from the quickly flanking attackers. The bunker team slipped away, escaping from their pinned position and off the bunker. Spartans fought hand to hand with the machines that stood three heads taller than them.

They started a retreat though, Hades bringing the rest of the machines back around the bunker to respond. The AI controlled force they faced was like no other military unit the UNSC would have encountered before. While a force of organic defenders would have been dead ages ago, the machines were adapters. For every attack, there was an instant response. They feared no enemy and would never break formation. It was a perfect simulation for a Geth opponents, though they were possibly more mobile and dynamic than a bunch of buffed up security droids.

Halsey knew some candidates stood out above others. One such candidate wasn't retreating, but continued to fight a Thor by herself. V-021 Ellie, Team Leader of Hornet fought the lumbering machine, kicking it in the centre of its frame but lacked the force to bring it off its feet. Hades responded, the Thor swinging its arm forward, which was easily dodged. Hades unexpectedly threw a kick, slamming the Spartan in the side and sending her toppling to the ground. The AI's hologram developed a grin as it worked with its greatest advantage. He knew how the enemy fought.

Hades moved to finish off the Spartan with a kick, but she rolled out of its path and back to her feet. The AI repeated the kick move but

as it did, the Spartan seized its leg and pulled. The Thor struggled to bring its leg back down, but her grasp was too strong, yanking the machine forward. Unable to support itself, the droid fell back and collapsed to the ground. V-021 released the leg and leaped on top of the Thor. Before Hades could throw her off, she reached underneath the Thor's humanoid head and found purchase, tearing out wires. The Spartan bailed from the machine as it flung itself back up, but stumbled and collapsed face first into the dirt as its motorization went haywire.

The melee continued, more so in the Spartan's favour. Hades fought a dozen battles at once. Two more Thor's had taken up positions, exchanging fire with Spartans wielding stolen Reverent's. The machines just fought more unpredictably. One reactivated its OMNI Tool and stunned the Human in front of it, bringing the Spartan down to the ground. As it readied for the final blow however, it was thrown off its feet as it was shoulder barged by the Sangheili Spartan M'ka and sent stumbling back. Before it could use its OMNI Tool again, a stone that size of a head came out of the sky and cracked the Thor's metal casing open. The machine collapsed to the ground.

A hailstorm of dismembered machines flew through the air, crushing another Thor. The Biotic Spartan; May V-134, caught the attention of Hades and was peppered with stun rounds. The Spartan swayed for a moment before she collapsed.

"Was this what you intended?" Ann questioned.

"Chaos, yes," Tammerson replied. "This wasn't meant to be an easy stroll or completed within a minute. The advantage of these machines here is that they won't go down until I judge that they've completed this exercise. Bring more back, Hades."

The Thor's resurrected themselves again, bringing a surviving eight back to twelve. Only four were too damaged beyond repair thus far but the Spartans had only lost two of their number, with only thirteen still standing. The Biotic subject V-289 was downed as well as the Turian V-077. The rest of the Spartans were spread between firing captured machine guns from range or still fighting close up.

Halsey grew a bit more disappointed for every misstep. This was the first three team unit to undergo this test and they weren't performing as expected. There was a comradeship of the team now yes, Spartans looking out for their team-mates and working as small units but ever since the first resurrection, the coherence collapsed. They fought separately without any movement as a larger unit. They'd lost two team members because of this.

Of the three teams combined for this operation, Javelin was at least making an effort. Spartan Xev, Cross and M'tras worked together to bring down one Thor after another by combining the fire-power of their captured weapons. The Human, Turian and Sangheili made an efficient fire team but their Quarian and Salarian were MIA. Halsey searched the screens and couldn't find them.

Hornet and Tempest were just slugging it out with the THOR's. It was Hornet that started the brawl and refused to retreat, while as Tempest only stayed for that very reason. The teams functioned on their own, obeying the appointed squad leaders, but couldn't work

together as peers. Was hierarchy all they understood? Tempest was finally breaking away now, dragging their fallen Biotic with them. That just left four members of Hornet to fight on their own, their own Quarian also not appearing.

"We've got three Spartans not on screen now," Halsey told Ananke. "Locate them."

"They're wise enough to eliminate the cameras," Ann replied. "Hades is using them."

Hornet was now surrounded, battered and kicked. They were minus one Turian and now the Sangheili Ro'gas went down, kicked into submission by four different machines. Now the last two Spartans, the ever persistent Ellie fighting back to back with V-299, the Bartarian wearily blinking his bruised eyes. Hades encircled them, using his numbers to simply beat them down. They had none of that though.

V-021 Ellie continued to fight, dodging the incoming machine fist. Ketei caught the Thor's arm and held it, while Ellie ducked underneath and slashed a knife across the underside, cutting the exposed cables. The arm now useless, the Thor flailed as Ketei seized the limb. Suddenly, the Thor began firing its Reverent as the Bartarian Spartan steered it to face the nearby machines, peppering them with their own bullets at close range. The Thor's coiled away, their shields collapsing. The circle broken, both Ellie and Ketei escaped, leaving the damaged Thor still firing wildly into the air.

"That's more like it," Tammerson said, nodding. Nearby, Tempest took cover, the Quarian Lena using a stolen OMNI Tool to remotely control the weapon.

"Oh, it's not over yet," Hades commented. There was now only seven Thor's left standing. Two were exchanging fire with Team Javelin while the other five readied themselves. The AI detonated the fallen machines, exploding them into a hailstorm of debris. They kicked up the sand that lined the floors, creating a blinding storm that even the observers were having trouble seeing through.

The Thor's had no issues with this though, because they charged through it, slamming into Spartans who couldn't see them coming. Javelin was forced to abandon their weapons as they had to face two incoming Thor's hand to hand. Hornet didn't manage to regroup with Tempest in time before they were hit.

A Thor shoulder barged Ellie, knocking her to the ground. The already bruised Spartan's vitals flared on the monitors, a notable head injury. Some bones broke. Ann's avatar flared a deep blue at that.

Hades knew the rules and left the crippled Spartan alone, turning the Thor around only to have a small boulder crash into the head mounted camera, smashing it to pieces. The Thor was thrown to the ground as Ketei was upon it, the Bartarian thrashing the machine's head before ramming it into the dirt. Tempest charged in, resuming the battle against the machines. There was now only about seven Spartans now, holding off six Thor's.

One Thor went to step back and got its foot stuck in a pit. Before Hades could bring his attention to it, the machine was disabled with a quick knife through the back of its neck. The electrical circuit within the machine broken, it couldn't function properly and only flailed as it fell to the ground. Their Salarian had reappeared, pulling the fallen Thor up as cover as a hailstorm of bullets came flying at him. The Salarian Kiree V-448 lured Hades attention as the Thor's tightened their formation.

Just as Thor's stood together again, they went flying as a Biotic explosion ignited between them. The Biotic Charge had delivered one of the absent Quarrian from Hornet, who quickly sliced into one of the droid's before it could recover from the blast. Now no longer pinned down, Kiree charged in to support his team member. Javelin overcame their opponents, stomping on the fallen Thor's to keep them down for good.

It was an impressive return but Halsey however speculated why they were so late.

Now Hades only had three machines remaining and he had them retreat. Their hail of stun rounds was enough to keep their attackers away as they made a careful fall back towards the bunker. From the side however, Tempest's team leader Baal V-009 came in at them.

He slammed into the nearest Thor, knocking it but not stunning it. The Quarrian Biotic Nawi levitated a fallen Thor and chucked it, knocking down the third last standing machine. The other two turned on Baal though, teaming up to attack from both sides. Hades landed a punch straight and centre, knocking the Spartan to the ground. It didn't kick, but pointed the Reverent straight at him. At that range, even stun rounds would kill.

Before the AI could pull the trigger though, the second Thor raised it's rifle and blew it's comrade's head off. The Thor exploded and collapsed to the ground, betrayed. The hacked Thor itself then exploded, falling back. Hades in temper, began resurrecting even the crippled Thor's. Before he could however, they all self destructed.

Fayn, the Quarrian from Javelin, held a salvaged OMNI-Tool.

"I wasn't aware the OMNI Tools the Thor's were using contained hacking software," Tammerson commented.

"They didn't," Ann replied, folding her holographic arms. "Took him long enough to make some though."

"All teams, stand down," Tammerson ordered. "This exercise is over."

As the Spartans slowly limped out, Hades reappeared, not looking amused.

"Hades," Tammerson told the AI, "think you can swap out for the next round. Give Cody control."

"As you wish," the AI answered, still sounding a bit furious. Hades was a bit too dangerous a unit to control exercises. He never liked loosing even once.

"Conclusions, Doctor?" Tammerson asked.

"They certainly picked up at the end, but this wasn't my desired results," Halsey replied. "I would have expected better by now."

"They're only just ten," Ann commented.

"That's not fast enough for the Admiral's liking, Ann," Tammerson told her.

"Indeed," Halsey replied. "Tempest, Javelin and Hornet are our best thus far and this was disappointing. If they really were facing a Geth platoon, losing half the unit is unacceptable. For now, halve the number of droids. I don't want our infirmary overflowing. What I do want however, is a plan to improve their combat skills within the year."

"Easier said than done, Doctor. You've already had me reduce direct combat training down in favour of stealth," Tammerson replied, glaring. Halsey didn't care however, wanting only results. They were being pressured for immediate proof of the program's success while they had less time than ever with Ananke spending time teaching the Spartans long term infiltration techniques never in any previous program. These Spartans were both spies and soldiers. It was a miracle they'd gotten this far, but her Spartans were yet to live up to her expectations.

"Ann, have all three teams wait in the briefing area," Halsey told the AI. "I'm in need of an insight."

\* \* \*

><p>Team Tempest was maybe second worst of in terms of injuries out of the three of them. Baal still clutched his side, knowing there was a pretty big bruise underneath the padding of the black combat gear. He was holding up better than May, who was still shaking off the effect of the stun rounds and had to be held up by M'ka. The Sangheili looked happy at least, feeling he'd done well. Vicus looked less amused, the Turian having the most negligible impact on the fight, being zapped and taken down so early on. Lena was her usual self, the Quarian completely silent and unreadable behind that tinted visor.<p>

The exercise had been finished yes, but it hadn't been won. That was a significant difference in all their minds.

Javelin, always needing to prove they were hardier stuff, stood at complete attention despite their aching wounds. Easy for them when they had spent so much of the battle staying out of the actual fight.

Hornet had done the most of the fighting and was an absolute wreck. The Batarian Ketei and Quarian Nawi were the only ones left present while their team members were carted off to the infirmary. Hann and Ro'gas were just plain beaten to the ground but Ellie was hammered. Broken bones would need treatment.

"Failure," Vicus spoke up, growling. "We failed."

"The exercise was concluded, not failed, Vicus," Lena muttered, her arms folded.

"We destroyed the enemy completely," M'ka said, the Sangheili slamming his fists together. Sometimes, Baal thought they'd been given a Krogan who looked like an Sangheili by mistake. "That's a victory." \*\*  
><strong>

"We were sloppy," Vicus argued, the Turian crest standing up. He looked to Baal. "We should have been better!"

"I agree," Baal told them. "We should have finished them off, not let them come back twice."

"Ain't that foresight?" Xev spoke up, looking bit smug.

"Shut up Xev," Baal told his brother. "Where were you in that fight?"

"Don't question my decisions," Cross said, stepping forward. The Turian never came with a name, thus got the nickname he always lived up to. "It was the plan we agreed to."

"Not questioning you, Crossy," Baal told the Turian, who stepped back into line with the squad he led.

"You did nothing in that fight," Vicus didn't let it go. "You couldn't hit the ground with those guns!"

"Shut it!" Cross shouted.

"You won't be telling them what to do," Baal told him. "This is our team, not yours."

"That's right," M'ka added.

"I'll show you!" Cross charged at Baal, grabbing him around the neck. Baal struggled and kicked the Turian in the chest to no effect. Everyone moved in to pull them apart, but Cross knocked them off. "Your dead you-"

Cross was picked up and thrown across the room, sliding across the floor and smacking into a wall. May stumbled for a moment, before collapsing only to be caught by M'ka. The Turian slowly shook off the effects of the Biotic Throw, dazed. Xev grabbed his arm. "Calm down."

Xev was shoved away, but Cross only growled and shook his head before returning back to his former position. He looked at Baal for a moment and whispered. "One day you'll pay for that."

May struggled to keep standing, exhausted by both injuries and the energy expended. Slowly, she recovered and stood up without M'ka's help.

"Nice," Nawi commented, impressed. The Quarian Biotic from Hornet Team looked considerably cheerful as always. Cross didn't react.



"Spartans," a familiar voice called, and they all snapped to attention. "Blatant violence asides for a moment."

Doctor Halsey stepped into the room, data pad in hand. It looked like she'd actually been watching for quite a while and wasn't amused. "I am disappointed to witness yet another failure. You may work as a team, but you lack the ability to work as part of something greater. Please explain to me squad leaders, why that is?"

"Ma'am," Cross said. "We followed the plan we made."

"Yes," Halsey replied. "That plan was followed wasn't it, when Tempest broke from the battle and left Hornet to fight alone. Was it broken when you just sat on a hill shooting away at targets out of range while they overwhelmed the other teams?"

"That's wasn't planned for, ma'am," Cross said.

"Of course it wasn't," Halsey answered. "The second greatest failure today is that you lack to make new plans as new events occur. If you actually put that intelligence I've previously seen in you to good use, V-332, you'd have seen the obvious thing to do was to move your team forward. If there is the standard of the larger company, then I dread to see the teams that come after. After all, Chief Instructor Tammerson believes you are the three top performing squads. Or maybe the others might actually have a clue how to work together. One team doesn't 'win' if the whole company is dead. I think I've made my point. Return to your barracks, Spartans."

They marched out of the room silently. Halsey realized more and more each day how draining this was.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterword:<strong>

\*\*Don't go flicking back chapters, you haven't missed anything. As part of the new revised story, the whole thing has been accelerated to actually get some life flowing through it. That means I just leaped four years after New Brandenburg and the initiation of the Spartan V Program. Yes, that means I skipped a lot with the Spartan V's, but we all know how that would have gone along. Team Building, yadda yadda, you've probably read it all before in Fall of Reach or Ghosts of Oynx. I wanted to skip that road block and only give you the good stuff. \*\*

\*\*Instead, the story is going to be moving forward in snapshots like this chapter and we get to know the OC's a bit better. The three team trio may seem a bit too much, but it's mainly going to flip between Tempest and Hornet for the next few chapters moving towards Augmentation and Deployment. Give me maybe three chapters and we'll reach the point when this story really kicks off... \*\*

## 12. VIII - Flashpoint

\*\*Chapter VIII: Flashpoint\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><strong>"You cannot comprehend the magnitude of our presence" -  
Reaper Hivemind<strong>

\* \* \*

><p>At the far edge of the galaxy was a system yet unseen by any empire of the cycle and one unvisited for millions of years. It was an ocean world not too far from a yellow sun and from afar, it looked totally unimportant to the universe at large. Closer inspection revealed ancient golden circular warships washed up upon the coral reefs, their innards of wire and metal long having bled out . This world was a graveyard for thousands of such battleships, and if the observer looked deep enough, at the very bottom of the ocean lay a Dreadnought, the largest carcass yet one still breathing. It sat sank at the bottom of the ocean, it's golden exterior untouched by entropy.<p>

It's Mass Effect core kept the vessel intact underneath the pressure that would normally reduced it to a flat surface. Within the caves at the bottom of this ancient ocean world, the Leviathans silently drifted around the dreadnought. Inside the alien warship, a monkish humanoid creature rested cross-legged on the cold metal floor, his head shaven with wires spilling out of his neck. Maybe once he was a free mind, but that was hundreds of thousands years ago. In meditation, he became one with his hosts and he could see what they saw. Recent victories had left them feeling triumphant, yet that confidence was shattered in an instant.

"No," the mediator whispered, shaking his head. "That must not be."

The orb at the centre of the Dreadnought's massive bridge came alive with darkness.

"It is too early. Our plans will come asunder if they reach the Citadel."

The orb growled with disapproval.

"Yes, if they fail though, it will be too suspicious. There are no alternatives however."

There was a whispering in his ear, coming with the shadows all around him.

"Yes, that could work... we will bring them out into the light. Then annihilate them."

The whispering voices muttered. It'll just be like Euler, Omega, Charnara and Engehios.

"It is possible? Infiltrate them. Turn this setback to our advantage."

The orb glowed approvingly and the whispers ended. The Dreadnought shuddered to life, blaring orange lights flicking on. The warship hummed as it accelerated out of the ocean into the night sky.

"Oh, yes, indeed masters, I do have a plan..."

\* \* \*

><p>A Sangheili officer watched from his command post, overlooking the dig site. The worker's picked away, carefully excavating the relic of the gods that lay underneath the sands. More of his comrades patrolled the perimeter, watching the cliffs for any signs of movement. A Locust flew overhead, keeping watch with a patrol of Banshees. They had spent so long hunting this prize and now they tore it from the surface of a world glassed so long ago.<p>

"Brother, we have it," an officer of the Major Domo rank announced.

"Then let us see it," the Ship Master marched down into the pit, seeing the shine of holy metal. What had been dug up from beneath the surface shone the purest silver and was shaped like a perfect sphere. There was nothing particular about it, but for some reason, it was most wonderful thing he'd ever seen, more glorious than even the Halo rings he'd seen in his decades long service. It was... marvellous.

"This artefact is claimed for the glory of the New Covenant!" the Ship Master declared. "The holiest of-"

His head exploded into a purple cloud of blood. His fellow Sangheili roared, drawing their carbines, before either taking cover or joining their leader in death. Rockets streaked out of the cliffs and blew Banshees out of the air, sending them wheeling to the ground below before bursting into flames. The familiar crackle of Human weapons could be heard, and the Sangheili took up positions as ghosts of this dead world descended upon them.

They were half mirage, half machine. Assault rifles flared and Sangheili collapsed. More blood thirsty warriors jumped into the fray, slashing and hacking down the Covenant troops. Energy swords ignited and the fight continued. Dozens of Spartans poured in, quickly overrunning their position. Against so many demons, they had no hope.

The Locust whirled into action, firing its mounted beam weapon on the cliffs and shattering them. The cloud of dust swept through the canyon, blinding the combatants. The Major Domo piloting the Locust grinned as the aircraft spun about and charged its weapon up to fire again. There was a crash behind him and he spun around to see a Kig-Yar fly across the cockpit and crash into the wall. Two Spartans entered with captured Energy Swords, making short work of the crew before commandeering the vehicle. They quickly turned it on the dig site's remaining defences, turning a Wraith into smouldering metal.

Wounded Sangheili dragged themselves along the ground, before being finished off. Spartans either fired bursts into their backs or slit their throats. They didn't stop until every last defender collapsed into the pooling blood. Spartan Three's gathered around the artefact, pulling out demolition packs. Isaiah reached out and attempted to attach one to the sphere but it couldn't take hold. It wouldn't stick nor could it be spiked in as the sphere seemed to be made of the most strongest material. Instead, he had his team just chuck a dozen of the packs underneath the sphere and just activate them there.

They fell back behind the barricades as the packs ignited, consuming the sphere instantly. The artefact cracked, unleashing a blinding flash of white light. When it cleared, the Sphere was gone and now there was only a crater.

"Good work," Isaiah told them. "A hundred so squids dead and one holy relic desecrated. All in a day's work."

\_"I saw that from here," \_the commander told them. \_"Good work, Scimitar. Move to extraction now. There's one CCS class cruiser inbound." \_

"Roger, commander" Isaiah answered, nodding. "All teams. Extraction now!"

\* \* \*

><p>Above was a thousand stars shining through a purple nebula and at the heart of this dome, sat a man without a name. The design intentionally invoked the original chamber he'd seen decades ago, though instead of darkness, now there was light. The galaxy shone above them, and marble statues of the Greek Gods of old circled the room.<p>

Those who entered came upwards from the lift at the heart of the chamber, directly into the eyes of its occupant, who sat behind an old fashion oakwood desk. The Illusive Man looked at the data-pad in front of him and pondered the results of Cerberus's latest endeavours. At the right hand corner of his desk was a binder thicker than a Krogan's skull and bursting with loose papers. He opened it as Operative Mason entered.

"I trust you found what I was looking for?" the Illusive Man questioned.

"I have it," Operative Mason said, walking forward and passing the report over the desk. The Illusive Man took it and quickly skimmed through it, noting the symbols present to those within his own tome. "That was from Illium, from the desk of the CEO of Sernice Arms. Further digging shows that they provided the Omega division of the Blue Suns with military grade armour and weapons."

"These symbols are not of any known origin," the Illusive Man observed. "Which means that these must be of some Leviathan make. They roughly are alike to Reaper markings. Do you detect any presence of Indoctrination on Illium?"

"Nothing of the kind, sir," Mason answered. "Scans indicated everything was clear."

"Perhaps it was not in the place itself, but the people," the Illusive Man mused, taking this in. "There has never been greater proof of a Leviathan proxy. I'm suspicious. They usually cover their tracks far better than this."

"Our infiltration was challenging enough, sir," Mason told him. "I went in there myself. Sernice may be the new kid on the block of galactic arms manufacture, but they have tight security. Latest mechanical units, detectors and significant Eclipse presence. We

don't have the numbers to find out what's really going on here."

"Indeed, Cerberus is still yet too few..." the Illusive Man acknowledged, looking back to his data-pad and the article that was still open. A grin appeared on his face, and he placed the report aside. "However, I don't think that we even need to deploy anything. I have a much better plan to dismantle Sernice Arms. Take this report and tell my assistant downstairs to mail this the special Extranet address we logged just two months ago."

"Who are we going to pass this onto?" Mason asked. "Nobody else cares."

"A few still do," the Illusive Man answered. "We'll send this report along to our old friends in the Spectres."

\* \* \*

><p>Garrus looked around the abandoned apartment, left untouched for years. Nestled away, this place obviously hadn't been destroyed in the Reaper attack a decade earlier, but nobody had ever come back here. Thus, the automatic maintenance had come back here and done its job, giving the place a look alike to every other place in the Citadel, so clean it could be said nobody ever lived here. The Turian sighed, walking around this place.<p>

While there were new residents above and below, this apartment hadn't been touched. As long as the Automated VI kept collecting rent, it didn't know that whoever lived here died a long time ago. That was until a week ago, the credits started running out and the owner actually looked into it and found it was the home of the long deceased Commander Shepard. The Elcor had contacted the Spectre Office; to which Shepard had been reinstated to posthumously, and Garrus had volunteered to bring the commander's personal effects to storage.

He knew that Shepard actually hadn't visited the place since the last night before the Normandy departed for Horizon. It was a curiosity to him why Shepard had never returned or even moved out of the place after the war. The account was continuously drained of credits for years for this place. That fact annoyed Garrus for hours. Shepard died a hero and the galaxy mourned, but in the end, Shepard had nobody to pick up the pieces.

The only property that was ever attended to was the Normandy; the ex-Cerberus frigate having been acknowledged as Shepard's since the war's end. Both the Council and the Alliance had wanted to acquire it, but Joker had fought for them to recognize the fact that EDI was the Normandy and the Normandy was EDI. They relented, knowing that the ship would have to be sold eventually when Joker could no longer afford to keep it running. They'd been surprised when the Normandy disappeared off the radar completely. Garrus didn't know where the ship was now exactly, only that it was a strain on the already weakened Shadow Broker network.

As for the rest, such as this apartment, nobody cared. Shepard hadn't any family for a long time. Nobody was interested in claiming any personal effects. Since the end of the war, Shepard felt like he could die any day and from the looks of it now, had long since

donated away the vast fortune of credits the Normandy had accumulated during it's Cerberus years into the rebuilding effort. A small piece, about half a percent, had been kept for a comfortable retirement. That money obviously evaporated here over the past few years.

It was time to face up to it and clean up this mess. Garrus toured the unlit rooms and looked over the few remaining things, such as a number of model ships. There was one of an Alliance Dreadnought still sitting on a desk. It was time to do what he should have done years ago if he hadn't fled to the Terminus to go back to doing what he'd done last time. As he picked up the model Dreadnought, the light flicked on in the room.

"Finally time to pack it away?" Tali asked and Garrus spun around.

"I didn't know-" Garrus said, pausing. "You still came here."

"I don't," Tali answered. "I heard that you were coming to clean up this place from Bau. Honestly, I didn't know it still existed."

"The credits ran out," Garrus said. "The Spectre Office was contacted since they had no clue who else to tell. Since nobody has ever claimed this stuff, we thought just to put it into storage."

Garrus looked at the Quarian and saw nothing. She had no emotion and was absolutely still.

"I'm sorry," Garrus said. "We really should have known then that there was things that needed attention."

"I knew," Tali admitted. "I knew that we'd left stuff lying around in places. I never looked into it though. I left everything the way it was because... then, I just thought... he might come back one day."

Garrus clenched his jaw, holding back an outburst.

"He'll never come back," Garrus said. "Never. He died that day and will never come back. Shepard was our friend and a comrade who deserved respect, but he wouldn't want this. He wouldn't want us to spend day after day still revolving around him. It's time to move on."

"I-" Tali spluttered, now looking furious. "What would you know? You've had no idea. You ran away to the Terminus while the rest of us fought to keep the Normandy! While you went on being a Spectre, I had to rebuild my life from scratch! I lived on to serve Rannoch, Geth and Quarians alike. You? You just went on to traipse around the galaxy killing people!"

"I'm a Spectre. It's what I do!"

"You still haven't given up trying to save the world," Tali muttered. "Maybe it's time you realized that you can't. The galaxy is in the best shape's it's ever been and it only goes downhill from here. Move on and stop playing Archangel."

"Move on?" Garrus questioned, angered. That put words in his mouth that he instantly regretted blurting out. "You still think Shepard

could be alive! He's dead and buried! Give it up!"

"He's come back before!" Tali shouted back.

"Not this time!" Garrus said. "It's been years and there's no Cerberus to put together another clone!"

That absolutely broke her. Half sobbing, she smashed her fist down on the table. "Get out! Just get out!"

He couldn't leave fast enough. Once he marched outside, he didn't know what to feel. It was strangely two-fold. First was the hatred and self-loathing for saying that. Secondly was that for some reason, a weight was lifted off his back. He shut the door behind him and left it all behind. The Normandy years and the friends he no longer had. Yes, that seemed quite fitting. He wasn't worthy to pretend he was the same Turian who'd fought the Reaper Wars and all that had led up to that. It was merely now that he stopped pretending.

What he was going to do now was have his facial tattoo removed completely. Bareface he would become and nobody would recognize him, much less expect anything of him. That was perfect. He would be just a Spectre; Archangel, once more and not the legendary Garrus Vakarian who everyone looked to for salvation.

His OMNI-Tool bleeped and he activated it, the golden interface flicking to life. It was a single high-priority message and he was surprised who it was from. For months, he'd investigated Omega to find some trail the Blue Suns could have left behind there, but found none. Now, he found the supplier. He had the address of Sernice Arms Headquarters, curtesy of Cerberus.

What he was about to head into was either a trap or the lead that would take him to revenge. He had so much anger to work out, it didn't matter either way.

\* \* \*

><p>The Office of Naval Intelligence had dubbed the non-existent Frigate as <em>Sacrifice <em>and to the mind of it's commander, it was more than fitting. Technically, the Sacrifice was not under the command of the United Nations Space Command nor did ONI have any knowledge of its existence. If it was ever spotted, it was assumed to be a rebel ship, one of many old wrecks salvaged from debris fields above colonies glassed a long time ago. Spotted it wouldn't be, because the Sacrifice flew far beyond the most furtherest Humanity had ever ventured.

Gamma Company had carried out raids throughout the sector, a particular region of space that once was home to the Shield World known as Requiem. The whole region was numerously populated by Forerunner remains, therefore those places became home to what was left of the old Covenant's more fanatical elements. A year ago when the Sacrifice first arrived, there was almost two hundred cults. Now there was under a dozen.

Forerunner structures had been demolished, ground forces annihilated and old Covenant capital-class ships had been destroyed. Slowly upon this place, what was left of the Covenant was dying. Every now and then, more would arrive. Entire clans of Sangheili exiled from their

original worlds would attempt to settle here and would always throw their lot in with the cults. Gamma Company's new superiors found it challenging to secretly ship the sheer amount of ammunition they were expending as they cleansed the sector.

A flight of Pelicans returned to the Sacrifice, the same rebel vehicles they'd stolen from New Brandenburg. There was only space inside the frigate for five, so the remaining three were treated as spares and strapped to the Sacrifice's hull. The frigate was still home to over a hundred and forty Spartans. Ever since they had begun their campaign, Gamma Company had more than shown they could still carry out their original mission with complete lethality. Compared to the enormous losses suffered by the cultist forces, there had only been three Spartans lost in the fight. Fighting against what they believed the true enemy, the company's morale had recovered from its previously sapped state.

Kelly still had trouble placing whether it was because they were somehow enthusiastic to fight the Covenant or that now there was no rules to constrain them. Out here beyond the frontier, basically disavowed by ONI, Gamma Company was free to wipe out aliens in whatever manner they pleased. If that was what it took to pull off many successful missions, then so be it but as more time passed, they only seemed to be growing more violent and less disciplined.

She pushed those thoughts aside, reconsidering the map of the nearby solar systems. With every Forerunner relic that fell into cultist hands, their morale and prestige surged and drew more followers to their cause. They had denied control of one such relic today, but there were more constantly being dug up all over the sector. Perhaps it was time to simply find a Forerunner artefact and track it down to a stronghold and then wipe them out there. There was about a dozen options on the table where Sacrifice could go next, and each of them was roughly the same, another artefact being excavated. The constant raids by Spartans didn't seem to ever discourage their fanatical search.

The AI pedestal lit up and Kelly turned her head upwards. An AI materialized, no doubt another courier from Section Zero.

"Commander 087," An AI dressed like a Roman senator addressed her. "I come bearing orders from our superiors. We have a new primary mission beyond the Requiem sector."

"Pass on the data," she answered and the AI brought it up on the main screen. It was a space station, but certainly neither of Human nor Covenant style. It looked like a shipyard, with a hanger revealing an oddly shaped ship within.

"What we're looking at is a rebel shipyard," the AI explained, surprising her. When since had the Insurrectionists had the technology to assemble something so elegantly smooth? Something that wasted so much resources? "This shipyard is home to a ship we'd like to see captured and placed into ONI hands. It is a sort of stealth ship, much alike ONI's own Prowler's a few decades ago. Electronic stealth, not active camouflage. This ship represents a major threat to UNSC security and is priority that it be captured."

"It seems like something too hot for Gamma Company to handle," Kelly told the AI. "I recall, nobody beyond Section Zero is meant to know



about us. If this ship has ONI's attention, then have you considered the possibility they'll figure out who stole it for them?"

"It's all been accounted for," the ONI AI assured her. "Loyal agents will take control of the ship and deliver it. All that we require is that you board this shipyard, neutralize the crew and deliver the ship intact to the coordinates provided. I've already uploaded the location of this ship to your navigation computer and I have also left a more detailed account of the opposition present on the shipyard."

"Then we'll see it done," Kelly said, nodding. "If the ship is in dock, is still under construction or is it ready to fly?"

"Oh, it's actually a bit older than you'd think. Only now have we considered its acquisition" the AI said. "The exact name of the ship you will be looking for is the\_ Normandy\_."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>28th December, 2576 (UNSC Standard Military Calender)<strong>

"Tempest One: eighty-four percent achievement," the dumb AI controlling the firing range reported. Baal scowled underneath his helmet, lowering the MA6K Assault Rifle.

"Tempest Five: ninety percent achievement," the AI rattled off next and May shot him what could be almost described as a smug look.

"Tempest Three: forty-one percent achievement." M'ka cursed silently, the Sangheili struggling to hold the weapon properly, the cut down Assault Rifle too small for his hands. Bullets still rattled off in bursts besides them as the last two members of the team took their time.

"Tempest Two: ninety-four percent achievement." Vicus didn't show the faintest mark of pride for getting the highest overall rating for accuracy. The Turian just calmly flipped the safety back on and set the weapon down.

"Tempest Four: eighty-one percent achievement." Lena lowering her own rifle, possibly scowling underneath that helmet. Perfect accuracy but improper handling of the weapon and bad timing.

"Overall squad average: seventy-eight percent achievement," the firing range computer announced. Tammerson hardly looked amused.

"Your performance is absolutely pathetic, Tempest!" Tammerson shouted. "I expected a hundred percent! You could barely give me anything close to that! Seventy eight percent is not acceptable! You're going to do this again, but better this time! Next weapon!"

Tempest squad swapped out their MA6K rifles for the opposite, the M-8 Avenger. They returned to their positions, readying. Baal focused, tightening his grip on the weapon.

"Commence in 3, 2, 1... Now," the Computer ordered. Baal fired at the first target that leaped up in front of him, the digital marker flashing green. Dozens of targets popped up within seconds and he targeted them one by one, shooting controlled bursts. Unlike the MA6K, the Avenger didn't need reloading and delivered much less recoil. It was a simple matter of aiming and squeezing the trigger. After a minute, the computer bleeped and the targets stopped appearing.

"Tempest One: ninety-eight percent achievement, Tempest Two: one-hundred percent achievement, Tempest Five: ninety-nine percent achievement, Tempest Four: one-hundred percent achievement, Tempest Three: ninety-five percent achievement," the AI read out in rapid succession. "Overall squad average: ninety-eight percent."

Tammerson nodded acceptingly, a little more satisfied. "Not every weapon was created equal. As I've told you many times, you will not always have the luxury of choice though. A Spartan needs to be the master of any weapon and of every battlefield. I expect to see the squad average with the MA6K to be raised to ninety percent within the month. Do you understand."

"Yes, sir!"

"Good. Move out."

\* \* \*

><p>"Another week passes, and so does another year," Halsey mused as she looked over the latest results. "Happy new years, Ann."<p>

"The concept of years is irrelevant to both here and to me," Ann answered, the AI's arms folded. "It is only useful as the marker of our position in accordance to Human history. The increase of a mere one year is nothing to consider."

"Quite so," Halsey replied, looking at another paper. "With one year though, that marker shows our progression towards the final stage. How's the progress on the upcoming major operation?"

"The mock-up stronghold has been assembled and Tammerson has planned the whole thing out," Ann told her. "Quite an interesting addition. Today is possibly the most happy I've ever seen the trainees, or whatever passes for happy amongst Spartans. They find the concept of this simulation appealing."

"It's a challenge," Halsey stated. "Simple attackers versus defenders except this time, they know that pride is on the line. Have you made a choice for the five teams who will be in the attacking role?"

"Cody and I have selected Reverent, Hornet, Avenger, Claymore and Tempest. Each is headed in what we think are the most effective leaders in the company and they represent a different style. Claymore favours brute force, Hornet will most likely carry out a lightening attack, and so on. It'll be interesting to see which one wins out while competing with each other and simultaneously facing down four hundred of their fellow trainees at the same time," Ann said.

"What rules has Tammerson put in place?" Halsey questioned.

"Beyond the standard rules for trainee exercises, none, other than the first team that brings the flag back to the extraction point wins."

\* \* \*

><p>It was a usual exercise being deployed to the middle of nowhere where you couldn't glimpse any familiar formations or structures. Baal calculated that maybe a few clicks southward there was a Forerunner tower, but nothing more than that. It was likely just one of many that dotted the Shield World. No, their goal he was sure was eastward, towards the lake that they could see in the distance over thousands of pine trees. Just near the water there was a series of bunkers with dozens of their fellow trainees present. What they needed to do was first steal their flag and then return it to the extraction point. More importantly than that, do it before the four other competing teams could.<p>

They moved through the scrub, MA6K's in hand. The five man squad knew how to get place to place without being seen, and better yet, combine that with enough mobility that they wouldn't spend hours crawling through these bushes. They all paused as there was a rustling and they readied their weapons on the source, but it was an Engineer that drifted through the forest, humming. The alien keeper of the shield world ignored them and just kept on going. Baal watched it until it disappeared before signalling to move on. It was strange because the Engineers didn't usually pass through the training areas but it was irrelevant. They kept on going.

They eventually arrived, looking down at the make shift camp below from a far distant observation point. From this range, they could get a good look but they were still far away enough that they wouldn't be spotted.

It was a fenced complex surrounding an entire mock-up of the standard UNSC field base. Facing off against fellow trainees was possibly the hardest challenge of them all. There was eighty squads down there, four hundred Spartans in black training overalls that obscured every feature. Without electronics, there was no easy identification system such as friend or foe tags. It was as much challenge for them as the infiltrators. Baal placed himself in their shoes and knew that his fellow team leaders would have arranged every last detail. Every patrol would have a set path and if someone wasn't following it, they would be peppered with stun rounds from the nearest bunkers.

Personally, he couldn't help but give a rare grin. There was a challenge unlike both sides had faced and would be the mother of all bragging rights for those who were cunning and the ultimate humiliation for those who were fooled. There was no need to rush. Captain Tammerson had given them a whole three days until the infiltrators lost the challenge. Of course, they'd lose sooner if they were all caught and eliminated.

Likely, the defenders would hold up and just wait for the first few days, knowing their enemies would be scoping them out and waiting for them to get lax. As much as Baal considered challenging that expectation and striking as early as possible, he knew all it would take is one snag for them all to get caught and go down. A direct

confrontation with any equal number of defenders would be impossible considering the difference in their fire-power, silenced MA5K's compared to a whole collection of weapons loaded with stun rounds. An ambush would even the odds.

"Simple circular pattern twice over," Vicus observed. "There are two perimeters, both go around the fence. They just keep walking around and the squads in the bunkers just watch for any funny business."

"The size of that base though, you can see gaps," Baal replied. There is maybe a ninety second gap between each team. At some point, they go out of sight but only for so long.

"Watch out, I can only spot thirty squads," May reported. "There must be a rotation every twelve hours but that leaves twenty squads uncounted for. Maybe there are patrols inside the base?"

"You'd think we could spot them," Vicus replied, looking inside the compound and only maybe seeing five squads at most patrolling the inside. That left seventy five Spartans that could be anywhere. Perhaps out hunting the attackers and taking the offensive? Baal figured it out.

"Unlike us, they don't have proper camouflage," Baal reported, pointing out the difference. "In their current uniforms, they'd be good as dead hunting the likes of Avenger in the forests during the day. We blend in, but so do they at night. It's likely that the hunter units are resting with the night patrol. When it gets dark, they come out of the base and target us then."

"So, they restrict us to a day attack," M'ka summarized, the Sangheili already flexing in anticipation. "A head on assault."

"No so," Baal answered, already mentally drawing up his scheme. He already had considered on the way here who was in and who was out for an infiltration. They had already been given black uniforms to blend in with the defender's if they wanted. He believed that Lena was the perfect choice because no defender would ever recognize her rarely used voice. Himself, Vicus and M'ka were good choices too. They could remain undetected so long as they didn't run into Javelin Squad, who would be hunting them especially. That team rivalry had grown a bit out of control.

Meanwhile, May would not be going in. Problem that there was only so many Biotic wielders in the company and they all knew each other well. Many others would be suspicious too, especially after the whole incident resulting in a YIMR Mech crunched into a metal cube eight months ago in the joint company exercise.

"I got the plan." Baal told them. "We're going hunting."

"A night ambush?" Vicus suggested.

"Not for them," Baal replied. "Not yet anyway. We're going to go find our fellow infiltrators."

\* \* \*

><p>It didn't end as well as he'd hoped. He ended up dangling by his

foot from a tree, considerably unamused. Classic trap and one he hadn't expected. Reverent Team gathered around, looking quite smug as they focused weapons on him.<p>

"Tell me right now why we shouldn't shoot now and get you out of our way?" Joshua V-461 questioned. Ruthless if Baal remembered right and possibly the last squad leader he wanted to run into today asides from Ellie. He was notable only because he was the only trainee both a squad leader and Biotic.

"You can see the advantages of working together," Baal told his captor.

"There can only be one victor," Joshua reminded him. "Better we take you down now."

"Do that, and you'll never win. They know we are divided," Baal explained. "They expect that, that we attack only five strong each. We work together, and we'll double our chances. Then we can shoot each other after we've got the flag."

"Oh, don't give me that tacky team stuff," Joshua answered, prodding him with the end of his rifle. "There will be conditions. First off, I'll be in charge. Secondly, it'll be us who takes that flag down."

"Equal command or nothing at all," Baal told him.

"I lead or I blast you right now," Joshua gave the ultimatum, raising his rifle.

"Do that, and my team take you down," Baal replied. Tempest revealed their positions surrounding Reverent, positioned to wipe out the whole squad at the sacrifice of Baal. "Consider that?"

"Right," Joshua answered, glaring. He cut the rope and Baal fell to the ground with a thud. Grunting, Baal pulled himself back to his feet.

"Right," Baal replied. "Tonight, I can be sure that they're going to try hunting us. We've got the manpower combined to ambush them. I'll lead half our number into the base as returning hunters with M'ka here as a prisoner. Once inside, we get out of sight and then rig up all our stun grenades. Next step, raise hell."

"That would lead me with the other half to then distract them with a diversionary attack. Then what after?" Joshua questioned, raising his eyebrows.

"Then we sneak back out," Baal answered, grinning. "By then, I expect the other squads out there will have heard the racket and joined in the fun. In the chaos, we force our way out and then we regroup. Then we'll see who gets the flag."

"Sounds good," Joshua agreed, nodding. "Crazy plan; with minimal contingencies, that will get us killed, but sounds good. Mess with us though, and I'll mess you up. We'll go with this plan tonight. Lucky you're with us, because we sure know how to trap em."

\* \* \*

><p>Again, things failed to go as hoped. There was sounds of assault rifle fire off in the distance. No doubt, the three other squads had launched their own plans. Perhaps that was the real challenge of the exercise more so than any four hundred strong garrison. The defender's had been so handicapped by the exercise, they had to exercise the ultimate caution and planning but the greatest threat to the infiltrators was when their plans would crash into each other.<p>

Eventually, Reverent picked up a twenty strong unit heading their way. Tempest moved into position, waiting. The moon light was sufficient tonight that they could see outlines, and Baal could see them incoming. The night hunters knew that they'd signed up to run into ambushes and thus moved with absolute speed, racing through the forest in mass. Tempest wasn't an easily startled creature of the night though, and they held their ground as the hunters veered wildly left to right, trying to startle them into giving their position away before the time was right.

Joshua signalled first, a brief flash of light before five assault rifles fired stun rounds into the night. The hunters were hit centre on and four collapsed, but the others melted into the night, now aware of the attacker's direction. Tempest joined in, veering left to flank them. By ambushing them on two flanks, they surely made up for the fact they were out numbered two to one.

Both ambushing teams turned their flash-lights on, both to blind their hunters as well as make sure that no one escaped into the night. Flash-lights similarly shined back, hunting out their positions.

Baal fired his rifle into the night and saw the outline of a soldier go down. Cohesion was critical as they didn't get caught in friendly fire with Reverent. The skirmish continued, and stun rounds whizzed over Baal's head. He continued firing, hearing more bodies hitting the dirt and eventually the flashes of light went out as guns fell silent.

"Go!" Reverent cried out.

"Go!" Tempest answered. They slowly closed in on each other until they were standing back to back with everything covered. "Count em!"

"Twenty down!" May answered. "No other targets."

"We lost one of our number, but that was too easy," Joshua told them, Reverent reduced to a four man squad. He quickly moved to the nearest fallen and flipped them over. The downed Spartan had drawn orange markings on his black uniform. Baal checked this against the others and knew this must be the designation for the units hunting outside the base at night.

"Salvage them," Baal ordered, already nicking a Battle Rifle from one of the fallen. A couple more stun grenades were acquired. Otherwise, the twenty 'dead' trainees were left in the forest. At midnight, the angels of death; a bunch of automatons reverse engineered from Sentinels would fly in and literally pick them off the ground and return the eliminated trainees to base. Such fate awaited them as

well as one unlucky member of Reverent.

"Move out," Joshua told them and they disappeared back into the night, with gunfire still being heard on the horizon.

\* \* \*

><p>"Like I said, too easy," Joshua reminded Baal as he handled a stun grenade, placing it back in a satchel. It was morning and they'd taken rest beside a river, rotating between keeping watch and sleeping. Phase two of their plan would go tonight, and since then they had worked out many more flaws.<p>

"You're right," Baal answered. "They sent out those squads to fail. Stupid tactics and they did nothing to press any advantage. Think we've picked up anything we shouldn't have?"

"I checked our weapons and grenades," Vicus reported. "No trackers or anything unexpected."

"Why else waste their numbers?" Baal questioned. "It reeks of bad planning. They've got something serious planned."

"When my marksmen gets back, we'll have some better Intel on them," Joshua answered. "I'd like to know who took charge. I bet it was Cross. He was damn mad that he ended up playing offensive. Now if you excuse me, I'm going to get shut eye with the rest of my squad."

Baal huffed and nodded. They thought alike in that matter. Reverent was well familiar with the Tempest-Javelin rivalry of legend or more specifically Cross's vendetta. As much as Baal dismissed the Turian out of sheer spite, he knew that Cross was an effective leader. Javelin was average was far as squads came, but Cross pushed them above that into the top ten out of the hundred squads.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was all a distraction," May commented. "For Javelin to slip out and sneak right up on us now." May reached over and swatted Lena on the back of the neck, causing the Quarrian to jump. Lena then immediately shot May a death glare that was obvious even behind a visor.

"What's your bet on Hornet?" Baal said. "They could be carting the flag back home right now for all we know."

"How 'bout Claymore?" M'ka asked. "They know how to fight. In the night, I recognized their battle cries on the wind."

"Only Claymore is stupid enough to go roaring in the night," Baal answered. "Avenger likely took out their own hunters without firing a shot."

"How about us?" May asked. "What chances we got? Nine of us now and still three and a half hundred of them. We haven't got much of a plan."

"I do not look forward to being restrained," M'ka complained.

"Tonight, we give it our best," Baal told them. "All of us. I'm

taking Vicus and Lena with me, plus one of the Reverent. May, you're going to hang back and make some noise when things get going."

"Got it, boss," May answered, nodding. She already knew she was counted out. "Shame I can't join in the fun."

"It'll get fun soon enough," M'ka assured them.

\* \* \*

><p>Night had fallen over the lakeside and the patrols are rotated. Baal knew they counted on there being new hunter units tonight, otherwise they would have to be forced to try and convince the defenders that they were last night's hunters, something very unlikely to be believed. They'd probably already written them all off as casualties.<p>

"They are on the move," May announced, looking down the scope of her Battle Rifle. "I'm seeing forty hunters leaving from the main gate and moving out northward."

"What's going to be our window?" Joshua asked. "I'm thinking an hour's time until you approach. Then a further five until you get out of there."

"That'll be it," Baal told him, signalling for his team to follow. "Let's do this."

So they did. The newly structured Tempest minus May moved downward toward's the base and hid as they waited. Baal had chosen to borrow Reverent's Turian squad member, because it made them look like less of a five man infiltrator squad with Vicus as well. They couldn't have two Turians on one squad if they weren't with the hunting units, could they?

Finally at the moment of truth, Baal saw the watch he carried hit the hour mark since they separated from the others. They made their move, standing up and walking over the open fields towards the base in the same manner that the hunters had left. They went unchallenged by the patrols though the bunker towers focused their guns on them as soon as they noticed they were bringing in a prisoner. Baal led the escort towards the gate, knowing this would be the moment that would make or break them.

"Designation and intention," one of the trainee's manning the gate called out to them. Baal didn't answer, instead motioning impatiently for them to open the gate. He was betting that Anthony V-224 didn't think that Baal had remembered a protocol he'd used three years ago and if Cross put someone in charge of the defences, it would be Anthony. This was simply a little trick because if a superior asked, you always gave an answer and in this case, if you gave an answer, you'd immediately be shot as an intruder.

They opened the gate and let them through and Baal silently was thankful they'd passed that challenge. They walked through the gate where a squad greeted them. Baal acted neutral, knowing that doing anything that you would usually do to convince any other guard that you were on their side would immediately out them here. Basically, they acted just the same.



"Captured 'em," Baal told the greeting party, without adding any explanation that would usually follow.

"Right O," a squad leader that Baal didn't recognize answered, flashing a condescending smile. "Put them with the rest we got. You know where."

"Right O," Baal returned, making the sign with his hand. He motioned for Vicus and their Reverent ally to lead M'ka with them and they walked off to the barracks block, four structures to house the defenders. As they passed the third block, Lena slipped away from them. Baal continued onward, choosing what would usually be the motor pool in a usual base. In this scenario, it would be unused and therefore allocated to a new purpose. Sure enough, there was a squad outside, waiting impatiently.

"One for the pile," Baal told them, handing over M'ka.

"It's been good hunting I see," another trainee answered, one that Baal might thought he could distinctly remember, therefore took notice to be wary of. "That makes it two now. Heard from Vindicator that we just wiped out Claymore northward."

"Good riddance, eh?" Vicus added.

"That Sangheili owes me rations," the guard leader answered, nodding back towards the gate. "Well, go on then. You get to go fish out more of 'em."

"Gotta check someone first," Baal told him to make sure it wasn't very suspicious when they didn't go straight back to the gate. "Taking this guy down cost us."

"Don't let Cross see ya hanging around here instead out of being out there," the guard warned. "He's on a warpath."

Baal left it at that and they left M'ka imprisoned for now. He made note of the guard's position for when they came back for him. As easy as it would be to leave a man behind, Baal wasn't going to do it, training exercise or not. They walked past the barracks, and when they were sure no one was watching, they slipped out of sight.

\* \* \*

><p>Lena limped through the door, dragging behind a foot. While everyone had been endlessly chattering, she'd used her time wisely to prepare for this moment. Finding a nice sharp rock by the river side, she'd cut a gash in her suit just above her foot. It felt funny, but she was well hardened to the effects. Augmentation had already made the environmental suit unneeded for years. Injuries were still meant to be treated with caution though until the full Augmentation process. It was a perfect spot to take advantage of.<p>

She went unnoticed moving through the barracks until she sat down beside a footlocker marked with a red cross. Taking out the medical supplies, she applied bio-foam to the wound and but left the cut open in her suit. When she did put back the supplies however, she put a duo of stun grenades underneath them. Leaving the footlocker open, she simply stood up and walked out past either the chattering or sleeping squads. Once outside, she simply repeated the process for

every one of the four barracks, applying a tiny bit of bio-foam and then placing everything back plus those two things extra. Each was placed in a certain order and with good timing, they would explode roughly at the same time.

Finally applying sealant to close up the gash, Lena marched inconspicuously before finally getting out of the sight. Darting under cover, she regrouped with Vicus. There was a thumb's up and everything was set.

The first batch of stun grenades exploded in the midst of the heavily populated barracks. The blast made everyone inside blind and deaf momentarily and those close enough to the footlocker were hit by the kinetic force that locked up their gear in the same way a stun round would, marking them as casualties. The entire base went alive and it was only by the time of the fourth batch of grenades that they'd fled the barracks in time. That was maybe forty casualties, but hopefully more than a hundred out of the fight.

Joshua's team made their attack, firing down upon the patrols on the perimeter. They all converged southward to counter instead of coming to the base's aid. Tempest team began raising hell, chucking stun grenades around corners and taking down confused squads. There was still maybe forty enemies inside the base with a hundred and a half outside. Soon enough, more gunfire was coming from the forests as the other attacking squads got a sense something was going on without them.

Lena raised her Battle-Rifle as she spun around the corner and fired in bursts. Just one direct hit with a stun round was enough to take them down. The guards outside the makeshift holding cell collapsed. With Vicus covering her, she approached the holding cell door and flicked the lock. M'ka immediately burst out, seizing up a MA6B Assault Rifle from a fallen guard. He immediately spun it around and trained it on the two other prisoners inside, who put their hands up.

"Two from Avenger Squad," M'ka told them. "What'll we do with them?"

"You two," Vicus told them, "you're with us. We're going to nab that flag and get out of here. Grab weapons."

The two, a Turian and Sangheili from Avenger Squad salvaged weapons from the fallen guards and joined them. While their capture had possibly been in circumstances of failure, members of Avenger still were some of the most sneakiest. Lena didn't want them to get out of sight, lest Tempest get back stabbed when the flag was within reach.

They were five strong now and used the initiative to their advantage. Save for the two Avenger members, they looked like the defenders themselves. Every time an enemy squad entered the base, they couldn't tell who was on whose side. The squads outside were becoming aware of what was going on and started to flow back in. A few dozen they could handle with surprise and confusion on their side, but a hundred was just too much.

Tempest rallied at the designated point, in front of the barracks and right before the flag pole where the flag itself hung motionlessly in

the windless night. Baal was already there, winding down the flag while being covered by their Reverent member. Their team leader almost had the flag in hand but two squads of defenders came around the corner and spotted them. Stun rounds flew out and hit the Reverent Turian, but Baal managed to miss the incoming rounds by hiding behind the thin cover of the flag pole. Assault rifles were too inaccurate to hit from that range, but battle rifles weren't.

Lena looked down the scope and targeted the shooters. Squeezing over two shots, the enemy team-leaders went down. Processing everything with a marksman's mind, she calmly went between targets and took them down. Combined Vicus's own rifle fire, the incoming defenders were taken down. Baal seized the flag and raced off to regroup with them. They had it in hand now. It was only just a matter of getting out.

They approached the eastern fence. The defenders manning the bunkers there had abandoned their positions to head inward. It didn't take long for Tempest to smash their way through the wire barrier and out the eastern side of the base. In front of them now was the sandy dunes just before the lake, which was exactly why they'd chosen this route. They just moved southward along the lakeside, while battle raged between attackers and defenders. They managed to escape combat completely, eventually running back into the forests.

"Alright, we are going to link back up with Reverent and make our way to the extraction point," Baal told them.

"Reverent want the flag too," Vicus pointed out. "They'll attack us to get it. We should head straight to the extraction point."

"And leave May behind?" Baal questioned. "I'm not leaving anyone. We're not only getting the flag, we're getting it with our whole team intact."

Baal didn't realize the two Avenger members slowly withdrawing their weapons. They sprung into action, the Turian grabbing Lena around the neck and holding a pistol to her head while the Sangheili covered him.

"Alright," the Avenger said. "You give us the flag."

"Coward!" M'ka shouted, training his rifle on them.

"Victory had any price," the Avenger Sangheili answered. "Give us the flag."

Lena gave her own answer, throwing her helmeted head back and slamming the Turian in the face, causing him to loose hold. She spun around and seized the pistol out of his hand, shooting him repeatedly. The Sangheili turned on the Quarian, but before she could fire, Tempest took down the last member of Avenger squad with a hail of stun rounds.

"That's Avenger neutralized," Baal said, reloading his rifle. "Claymore is out as far as we know. That means that only Hornet maybe out there."

\* \* \*

><p>They found Reverent on the hill where they left them. All of them had gone down when the defenders counter-attacked, including May. Baal felt chilly as he saw his team member sprawled out on the ground, her shocked face still staring at the sky. Just temporarily stunned he knew, but it wasn't a pretty sight. He motioned silently for them to move on to the extraction point.<p>

It was half way between here and there when they struck. Stun rounds came from under the forest and forced them into cover, but one hit M'ka. The Sangheili fought against the effects for a second, even with body going numb, firing wildly as he fell to the ground. The last three members of Tempest took cover behind a boulder as hundreds of stun rounds flew overhead. They were just too outnumbered and out-gunned to escape. What they have though, was that in their current cover, they couldn't be flanked without some serious causalities.

Their attackers did it anyway and Vicus took them down the second they went around the corner into sight. After they took down a dozen of their attackers by holding their position, the assault relented.

"Come out from behind that rock!" a familiar voice called. Cross. "Give it up! I've spent all night hunting you down. You've been bested!"

Lena chucked a stun grenade over the boulder. There was an explosion and a few shouts, but Cross just continued shouting.

"How long until you run out of ammunition? I've got fifty and you're only three," Cross told them. Of course, with that numerical superiority, they were done for. The odds were balanced by the fact that Cross was ordering them into suicidal movements, but that didn't matter when he could just overrun them. Baal didn't give up now purely because he refused to be beaten now when they had gotten this far. He had a plan though. He motioned for his two remaining friends to hand over the remaining stun grenades.

"Alright! You win! I'm coming out with the flag," Baal told them. He hid the stun grenades under the flag he draped over them, and put his finger around the pin. He stood up and turned around the corner, seeing about twenty rifles focused on him as well as Cross and Javelin Squad. Baal calmly walked forward and the second he walked clear of the boulders, Javelin opened fire and took him down.

Baal hit the ground with a thud. A shudder of shock went through his shoulder and he felt his body seizing up, unable to move. He remembered M'ka however, and continued to flex his hands still hidden underneath the flag. Cross approached, ready to reclaim the flag from him. The second they all closed in, Baal gave his greatest effort and pulled the pin. The stun grenades went off right and everything went dark.

\* \* \*

><p>Vicus watched as his leader sacrificed himself for the team. The stun grenades detonated in the midst of them, taking down a majority of their attackers as well as the whole Javelin squad. The last two survivors of Tempest spun around the corners, finishing off their

blinded enemies. They kept shooting until every last attacker had fallen. Lena approached where Baal had fallen, snatching up the flag.<p>

They both looked down and saw blood covering their team leader. He was literally right underneath those grenades and even with their weak kinetic force, they'd pounded him into the ground. He was injured and severely. There was nothing they could do though, and they ran to the extraction point and victory.

\* \* \*

><p>"Lots of useless tactics," Halsey observed. "You didn't correctly realize what would happen with the competitive nature factored in. They are more willing to flaunt the fact that its a simulation and carry out suicidal movements that would never take place in an actual battle."<p>

"I'm dispatching the automatons now to retrieve the fallen," Tammerson replied. "The simulation is over and I'll soon correct those mistakes."

"Indeed," Halsey replied, still monitoring the screens. "Still, there was some success. When your done clarifying the serious nature of the simulations, continue rotating the exercise until every team has completed it. Meanwhile, I need to attend to other matters.

Halsey looked down at the folder in front of her and the papers inside. There was preparations that needed to be made for the upcoming Augmentations.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterword:<strong>

\*\*Probably the best news is that I've chosen to dedicate my April Nanowrimo challenge this year to Kin From the Stars, with a set goal of 75'000 words. This means we could not only be seeing the end of Section I this month, but the end of Section II. The entire story is set to double in length. I'm personally shaking with excitement to get writing the Section I Finale after the next chapter.\*\*

\*\*So, get ready for a lot of updates hopefully. There is just too much going on in this chapter to discuss, with every plot line moving forward towards a convergence point. \*\*

### 13. IX - Rebirth

\*\*Chapter IX: Rebirth\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><em>SYSTEM TIME: 11th April, 2577 (UNSC Standard Military Calendar) 4th November, 2201 (System's Alliance Galactic Timestamp)

—

\_\_Communication Channel Alpha, Communique 77263A7  
>Classification Level: Omega<em>\_\_

\_\_\_\_Sender: Rear Admiral Anthony Curtyn  
><em>Location: Specific Location Classified, Sydney, Australia,  
Earth<em>  
><em>\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_Receiver: Classified\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_It is confirmed now. The VRR Napoleon is sailing and has made a Slip Space jump towards not to the predicted coordinates, but to the ones we assumed least likely. The UNSC Loki is now in full pursuit, with a full company of Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. They will intercept the target when it arrives at its destination and capture the freighter. I fear that the Napoleon is all but a ruse however, as scans have returned a Slip Space imprint twice the size of the freighter. It is likely that two ships are travelling in tandem and the Napoleon is the sacrificial martyr. The trajectory these ships have set out on lines up with two known systems of importance and I plan to focus my efforts on pursuing this unknown second ship.

><em>\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_If calculations are correct on the exact specifications of that unknown contact, we could have eight months until it happens. Once that ship arrives, we won't have any conventional options left to stop it. We will be forced to face the worst scenarios. That is unless you authorize our second option. The riskiest plan since Operation Red Flag. Using the Relay Network to our advantage, we can deploy a Prowler from Earth and have it reach Council Space within a week maximum. That is what I suggest we do. Order Halsey to immediately go to the final phase and have those Spartans deploy. There are no other options left on the table. As a precaution, I have already deployed another unit to capture the enemy's most strategic assets in case that this operation does fall apart, as there is a fifty-fifty chance from where I'm standing that it will. \_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_I await your authorization to raise the threat level. We only have a limited timespan to destroy the Napoleon's sister ship and her crew. I have already drawn up plans for Operation Thermopylae and request that you approve the plan. There is nothing else I think of that can avert this disaster.\_\_\_\_

\* \* \*

><p>Baal was willing to admit he'd overestimated his ability for once as hundreds of bullets shot overhead as Tempest was trapped pinned down in a trench. Dozens of simulated Citadel troops fired their position, keeping them pinned down. In this War Games simulation, they'd hit quite a snag on counting on their ability to bite off more than they could chew. Rain poured down around them, mud crowding around their boots.l<p>

"Prepare to move!" Baal shouted. "Five, Four, right! Rest, with me. Wait for the signal!"

Tempest squad broke in half, crawling along the ground as they moved into a new position. Baal took a frag grenade from his harness and chucked it. An explosion later, he heard alien screams. He prepped his rifle, looking to May and Vicus beside him doing likewise. He counted down in his head, listening to the rhythm of gunfire. Three, two, one.

On their Head's Up Display, the light flashed green and Tempest stood out of cover. Baal took down two incoming hostiles, before ducking back into cover as fire resumed. A grenade flew overhead and exploded where they had previously been standing. An rifle-launched grenade went up behind them, knocking the helmet from Vicus's head and sending the Turian tumbling down. May grabbed him by the shoulder and dragged him out of the way.

"We are pinned down here," Baal called into his COM. "Requesting assistance."

Nothing but static answered him. He cursed silently, ejecting the heat sink from the M-8 Assault Rifle. "Alright. We can't count on backup. Ready to return fire."

He counted them in again, popping up just as a majority of the enemy was reloading. He looked down the sights and fired off bursts, taking down a virtual Asari Commando, who fell and dissipated into pixels. May's Biotic power flared to life as she picked up a Krogan and then tossed him into a squad of Alliance soldiers, scattering them for Lena to pick off with a few short bursts. The firefight tipped to become in their favor, but it was a difficult battle.

"Flank right," Baal commanded and M'ka leaped out of the trenches, firing a Claymore Shotgun as he advanced and leaped down into a bunker, quickly dispatching the few hostiles still inside. M'ka covered Lena, who joined him. The two of them now fired on the enemy from the superior position, causing them to retreat back and find new cover.

"Right, with me," Baal ordered them and clambered up out of the trench, May and Vicus following him. They charged forward, mopping up a few survivors who hadn't fallen back. They continued to push forward over the drenched and muddy battlefield. They eventually stopped behind an overturned MAKO Tank as the enemy finally regrouped and held them back. A Hornet Gunship flew overhead, launching missiles to destroy yet another vehicle, a Hammerhead Tank crashing to the ground and exploding.

"This is Squad Paladin," a voice called through their COM. "Be aware, mixed enemy force approaching."

Baal signaled for them to hold position, darting out of cover and staring into the mist. Everything was dark and motionless. Then a purple flame appearing in the shadows.

"Move it!" Baal commanded, shoving Vicus out of cover before sprinting after them. The position they'd been a moment before flashed with light, before exploding. The plasma mortar destroyed the wrecked Alliance vehicle completely. A Wraith tank slowly drifted into view, firing its duel plasma turrets to keep them pinned down as new enemy troops rushed into the fight. The rapid assault vehicles known as Ghosts sped past them, circling Tempest and firing a spew of Plasma.

He immediately activated his OMNI-Tool and overloaded one Ghost, causing it to lose power but not momentum, the vehicle hitting a ridge and flipped; killing the driver. He threw a Plasma grenade at another, sticking it before the Ghost exploded in a plume of energy.

His team mates did likewise, quickly dispatching the rapid assault. By time they had finished with the Ghosts, they were struck again by Brutes wielding a chaotic range of melee weapons. A Chieftain swung his Gravity Hammer and Baal leaped out of the way. The kinetic blast however, sent him spiraling through the air. He felt a stab of pain before everything went black.

"Tempest One, terminated," the Simulator AI announced, the War Game ending for him. "Weapon of termination: Gravity Hammer device."

"Yea, those things can be a killer," Hann summarized, the Turian from Hornet squad already sitting up. Baal pulled himself up out of the simulator slate, and sat up, looking around. The rest of Tempest was still in action while he was done.

"You?" Baal asked.

"Fuel Rod Launcher at my feet decided it was a nice time to explode," Hann told him.

"Tempest Four, terminated," the Simulator spoke up. "Weapon of termination: Plasma Mortar."

Lena hardly looked amused, sitting up and shaking the numbness of the simulation off a bit. Baal didn't expect a comment.

"Thing is," Baal said, turning back to talking with Hann. "Simulator counts even minor injuries as termination. I could have totally survived that Gravity Hammer hit. All it did was spin me a bit."

"You didn't see it," Lena spoke up. "The way you landed and the fact it literally turned your head into pulp. You could have totally survived that, boss."

"Oi," Baal said, grinning at the sarcasm. "Well, my head wouldn't have been pulp if we were in proper Armour. MjÄlnir."

Baal could hear more announcement of termination further down the hall. Hann sighed, standing up.

"The Chief must not be in a good mood today," Hann said. "Summoning a Covenant army out of nowhere with no warning?"

"Well if they ever do figure out how to teleport, we're damn ready for them," Baal answered, though he wasn't feeling good about it either. Brutes were just another enemy that were thrown into the unknowable range, same with Krogen, Asari, Geth and Rachni. Powerful enemies, yet one he felt he just didn't understand as well as those species around him.

"Tempest Two, terminated," the AI chimed. "Weapon of termination: MA5B Assault Rifle."

"I don't want to think about that one," Lena commented.

"Did we miss out on the third wave?" Baal asked as May pulled herself up.



"Yep," May replied. "Though marines don't hold up very well against Biotics. Nothing to keep their boots on the ground."

"Tempest Three, terminated," the AI continued. "Weapon of termination: M-7 Lancer."

\* \* \*

><p>It was about the usual end of the week. Whereas he would have usually just lazed about in downtime, today he trained, bolstered his strength. With time, hopefully he could get it back to the level it once was during his prime.<p>

"Never knew you were the weight lifting type, Garrus," Kaiden commented. The Turian placed the weights now beside him, looking to the Human Spectre.

"I've always kept in good shape," Garrus told him. "Since there aren't many Reapers left to wrestle, I have to keep up my strength somehow. You haven't shown up here in a while."

"Been busy," Kaiden answered. "I've was previously assigned to an investigation into Cerberus activities throughout the Traverse."

"They still causing trouble?" Garrus asked, remembering the data on his OMNI-Tool.

"Not really," Kaiden replied, "not in the traditional sense. I read Bau's report on the new 'Illusive Man' that's shown up. Not good news. This new Cerberus off-shoot is just as crafty as the original and they're packing similar hardware."

"Waste of the Council's time if you ask me," Garrus told him. "We should focus on the real threat."

"Hard to do when the real threat isn't real in their eyes," Kaiden remarked. "Or, that's at least how they act. Same as always."

"Don't you worry," Garrus said. "I'll be doing something about it whether the Council sanctions it or not."

"Now, they've got me assigned to this top secret operation they won't tell anybody about," Kaiden said. "Personally, I noticed from the set up and what their putting together, it must some diplomatic event, a big one that needs serious security. I have no clue what shook things up but it's big. Matches the security details on First Contact greetings."

"You don't honestly think-"

"Nah. Now something like that we would have heard about by now. Personally, I think they might be bringing the Bartarians back into Council Space, or at least a few of the Bartarian worlds that aren't still ruled by warlords."

"Well, you'll find out, won't you?"

"Guess so. By the way, I think there's a requisition order waiting in the Spectre office," Kaiden told him.

"Then I'll be off to grab it," Garrus replied. "Some new armour."

"Bet you'll be busy."

"I'm dropping off the radar for a while," Garrus told him. "Got a mission to handle a far distance away."

"Thought I'd heard from Bau you were staying off-duty on the Citadel," Kaiden commented.

"This is off the records," Garrus replied and Kaiden nodded.

"Well, I wish you luck on that," Kaiden told him. "Seeya around."

"Good luck to you too," Garrus said, putting everything back in place. After that, he did visit requisitions and found his order.

He opened the metal container and pulled out his new gear. Raptor class armour, commonly used by Hierarchy Special Forces for lightening assaults. Even more powerful than the variant used in the Reaper Wars, it now had incorporated technology from Cerberus armour systems, allowing the user flight for up to a minute per burst. Garrus found the helmet, pulled it out and looked into the black visor of the blue helmet. This would do nicely.

From there forward, he got the rest of his gear ready. An old fashioned Lancer Assault Rifle, a Widow Sniper-Rifle and a host of other tools necessary. Before he knew it, he stood on Illium after a long flight, exactly where he needed to be.

He stood outside the headquarters of Sernice Arms and looked upward. The tower was just one of many amongst the metropolis that was Illium. Guarded by eight hundred security contractors, two thousand security platforms and a full company of Eclipse mercenaries ready to respond to any incursion. It was almost too easy. His entry was through a window, the glass shattering and triggering the silent alarm.

Archangel entered on the fortieth floor, about twenty downward from his target. From here, he could make short work of all of them.

\* \* \*

><p>Kaiden sat down at the conference table, alongside five other Spectres. While they had been operating more so in numbers than they ever had in the past, calling in six Spectres meant something damn serious. An aide came by, passing each of them a data-pad. Soon after, the holographic projector activated and the Council appeared.<p>

"No doubt you are contemplating the question on what could possibly warrant this great an assembly," the Asari Councillor told them. "It is true, that we are in serious need. By the end of the next weekly rotation, we will be undertaking a first contact scenario. We have seen fit to assemble this task-force to deal with any threats to the peaceful receiving of ambassadors."

There was no a mummer amongst them, but each Spectre no doubt harboured a significant number of questions. Kaiden wanted to know foremost how the Citadel Council had kept a first contact scenario under wraps. It was usually private explorers or expeditions that discovered new sentient species and reported that discovery back. When the Turian Hierarchy discovered Humanity, they couldn't keep that a secret no matter how hard they tried. It boggled his mind how it was still not public knowledge. This was no doubt juggled between the four ruling Council governments and there was bound to be a leak somewhere along the line.

"It shall be made public knowledge only three days before the event," the Councillor continued. "For now, this is a state secret of the utmost highest levels of classification. Everything we tell you now must never leaves this room. Please activate your data-pads."

Kaiden reached down and thumbed the button for the pad's activation. The screen lit up, the information he needed to know already on screen. It captured his attention entirely, and his eyes darted from the pictures to the translated texts. This had to be impossible. It made no logical sense. Yet here it was.

\* \* \*

><p>Eclipse mercenaries raised their weapons, but far too late. Archangel fired two bursts from his rifle and their shields collapsed before they were covered in acid, the illegal poisonous rounds exploding around them. They screamed as they collapsed to the floor. Switching over his ammunition to Disruptor, he cut down the approaching LOKI security mechs before activating his OMNI-Tool and frying the nearby control console, destroying the nexus of the building's security systems.<p>

\_"This is Cooper's. I've lost the security feed. What's going on down there?"\_ A voice called over the intercom.

\_"Sir, remain where you are. The attackers are still at large in the building."\_

\_"Just who the hell is attacking us? Have you identified them yet?"\_

Archangel took the chance and activated the intercom on his desk. "It's Archangel."

He didn't bother to check their reactions to that, just walking through the next set of doors and proceeding to his next objective. Once at the computer mainframe, he downloaded all the information he needed. Weapons hadn't just been sold to the Blue Suns, but continued to be sold all the time to anonymous customers. Of course, this wasn't unusual for the shady private military complex in the Traverse, but this was levels beyond supplying mercenary and pirate factions. This was duplicating every gun ever made, even restricted military grade weapons. This was being done in mass quantities and by now, it looked like Sernice Arms had manufactured enough illegal arms to supply a small planetary army.

What chilled him was what he saw next. A puppet company was also involved, Sernice Defence Systems; an Armour manufacturer, and what they were doing was replicating uniforms of organizations throughout

the galaxy and the order they had just filled had handed over hundreds of Citadel Security uniforms.

\* \* \*

><p>Tempest charged into the fight, overwhelming the opponent. They fought along the dusty ridges, evading incoming fire from simulated forces of every world. Baal opened fire with the Plasma Rifle he had in hand, taking down two incoming Orbital Drop Shock Troopers. May covered them, throwing up a Biotic Barrier to protect both them and Hornet squad. Nawi undertook a Biotic Charge, shattering a YIMR mech on impact.<p>

"Taking heavy fire," May shouted as she struggled to keep the Barrier up, a Scorpion Tank rounding the corner and firing on them.

"Move out!" Ellie commanded, leading Hornet out of the protective bubble and moving into cover behind the rockets to the left of them. The Scorpion turned its focus onto them, firing again and missing. Vicus moved out of the Biotic bubble, shouldering a Fuel Rod Launcher and firing a trio of shots that arced through the air and landed atop of the Scorpion, causing it to go up in flames.

"Move to cover," Baal shouted, and Tempest hunkered down. Rachni swarmed in, accompanied by Kig-Yar foot soldiers advancing behind shield walls. Baal tossed the spent Plasma Rifle aside and switched to a Sangheili Concussion Rifle, each bolt either blasting a Rachni into the air or shattering a piece of the shield wall. Vicus combined his fire, picking off hostiles where Baal had wounded them.

"Too many, fall back," Baal commanded, and they backpedaled, firing as they retreated uphill onto the ridge. As soon as the Rachni passed the first line, Baal hit the trigger on his gauntlet and the explosives went up, consuming dozens of Rachni warriors. Shrapnel picked the rest off. Tempest continued to retreat until they were back to back with another fire-team, this one being Javelin.

"Hold your ground!" Cross told them. Ten Spartans formed a defensive circle, taking on enemies charging in from all sides. Hunters dropped from overhead, each of their armored footfalls sending dust billowing into the air. The circle broke when they charged, the Hunters swinging their shield-arms strong enough to slice someone in half. Baal dodged around, grabbing the Hunter's back and pulling out his sidearm, a standard issue pistol, and firing bullet after bullet between the protective plates. The Hunter screamed, spinning around and nearly decapitating him.

Baal rolled away and back to his feet, leveling the pistol and firing shots into the Hunter's exposed abdomen. The walking alien tank screamed before it collapsed, orange worms spewing out onto the ground. A Phantom flew overhead, dropping more troops from Grunts to Brutes into the fight. M'ka roared as he tackled a Brute to the ground. Vicus fired off a battle rifle, taking down another Hunter. Baal's eyes widened when he saw a Brute Chieftain coming from above.

The Gravity Hammer slammed down, creating a dust storm and sending a few screaming Grunts flying. The Chieftain roared, shoulder-barging into Javelin and scattered them. With a swing of his arm, he sent Cross flying towards the sharp drop off the eastern side of the

ridge. Baal ran and leaped.

Just as Cross went over to fall fifty meters to the rocks below, Baal caught him by the arm and held on, stopping himself from being pulled along too. No words needed to be said as he dragged his fellow Spartan back up. The Turian merely nodded his appreciation, rejoining the fight. Just as they did that, the Chieftain stepped out of the dust whirling around them.

Baal dodged the Gravity Hammer this time, rolling to the side. Cross fired a charged up Plasma pistol burst, collapsing the Chieftain's shields and causing the Brute to scream in pain. Baal charged in from the side, charging into the Chieftain and firing his pistol into the unarmored fur of his neck, blood billowing out. The Brute attempted to throw him off, but Baal held on, wrestling the dying alien to the ground. Before he could however, he realized what the Brute was going to do.

He struggled to wrestle the weapon out of the Chieftain's paws but it was too late. He dodged behind the Brute's back. The Chieftain activated the Hammer and a kinetic blast blew his own head off and the remaining corpse flying away for half a dozen meters. Baal was covered in the bloody remains of the Brute and he was glad about the simulated nature of the exercise.

\* \* \*

><p>Things had calmed down a bit since last week thankfully. The Council had withdrawn into some quiet period of deliberation and the galaxy seemed still, or that's how it appeared from the Citadel. No news of warfare, raids or disputes. Rannoch itself had been quiet for months now ever since the last dispute with the Geth.<p>

"I'd offer you a drink, but I don't think you would survive," Tali joked, and Kaiden smiled. at that It was good to see the Lieutenant again.

"I don't mind," Kaiden replied. "Had some coffee not too long ago. Needed it. There's actually been a lot to attend to."

"Hm?" Tali questioned. "Rarely is everything so quiet. It's quite relaxing actually."

"We speculate that Alenko-Spectre has data more pressing than personal matters," the Geth platform Ambassador spoke up. The Geth had refused any larger space than a closet as an Embassy and since Tali seemed to deal with the Geth more than even the Council, the Geth platform could usually be found in the Quarian embassy. Personally, it was good to have someone to chat to, and the Ambassador as the platform identified itself as, was actually quite friendly, if not blunt in communication.

"You've got it right," Kaiden replied. "I'm here to pass on information. This isn't meant to go beyond you."

"I wasn't aware that Spectres handled that," Tali commented, frowning underneath her visor. "Highly unorthodox as they might say."

"It's really plausible deniability," Kaiden explained. "You need to know, but in case this goes wrong, the Council will claim they never

knew his information nor gave it to any ambassadors. Right now, everyone is getting a chat concerning this. I don't think I need to go through this with you. This packet isn't meant to be seen by anyone but you and you aren't to inform the Conclave on Rannoch about it." Kaiden turned to the Geth. "I'd say the same, but we both know that the Geth Collective knows everything you know and that is okay. We've got a saying in the Spectre office: Geth tell no tales."

"We anticipate this data," the Ambassador said, eye brightening.

"I'm sworn to inform the Conclave of anything they need to know," Tali answered. "By law, I cannot keep it secret."

"Politics thinks otherwise," Kaiden commented.

"I know," Tali replied. "Tell me though. Will I regret agreeing?"

"I think this is better handled by the Council for once," Kaiden said. "It will eventually be made public, but for now, it's best not to startle the Thresher Maw that is easily panicked masses. You can trust me of all people, and I say it's better kept under wraps."

"Then I agree," Tali said and Kaiden handed over the paper packet and an electronic one to Ambassador, who immediately assimilated the information.

"This was known to us," the Ambassador stated. "This only confirms theoretical scenarios we'd previously speculated. Conformation however, is troubling."

\* \* \*

><p>Archangel rounded the corner, kicking down the doors to the central office. There was no light, but through the blinds the room was illuminated by the flashing blue and red sirens outside as Illium's security forces circled the building. Cooper's looked up from the data-pad in front of him and put his hands in the air.<p>

"Listen, if it's money you want-" Coopers managed to sputter before the end of a Lancer rifle slammed into his face. He collapsed to the floor, bleeding from the nose. Archangel reached down, pulling the Human off the floor and shoving him back into the chair. His eyes fluttered, and came back to consciousness to begin babbling in terror.

"I don't want money!" Archangel shouted, chucking aside the now broken Lancer. He pulled out the Predator pistol on his belt. "You're selling guns to the wrong people! You're going to tell me where your weapons are going!"

"I don't know!" Cooper's screamed before he was punched in the face. He whimpered in pain, spitting out blood. "I don't know who you mean? Who!?"

"Blue Suns! Omega division!" Archangel shouted and Cooper's only grew more terrified.

"We didn't know they were crazy! Please! It was just business!" Cooper pleaded as Archangel placed the barrel of the weapon to his forehead.

"You've kept on selling though," Archangel said. "Thousands of weapons yearly just drop off the radar. Whose the buyer?"

"Cerberus! They said they were Cerberus!" Cooper told him. Archangel smashed his fist into Cooper's face again, sending a tooth flying.

"Liar!" Archangel spat. "Cerberus sent me here! Tell me the truth!"

"I don't know who they are!" Cooper shouted.

"Who are they!?" Archangel demanded, punching him in the face. Something cracked. When he didn't get an answer, he just hit him again. "Who! Tell me! Tell me!" He kept on striking Cooper's until the man fell from the seat and blood began pooling underneath him. Archangel took a deep breath in, flexing. His first most source was dead, but it didn't matter. It was justice in the end for a big time arms dealer.

He immediately picked up the data-pad off the desk, reading a half completed message to a contact known as Helios. Archangel activated his OMNI Tool, downloading the contents of the device. His Spectre hardware thankfully did the job in a few seconds, just in time before he heard an explosion in the lobby and shouting. Illium's security forces had arrived, accompanied by some rather cumbersome killing machines.

Archangel approached the window and found the controls, the automatic blinds rolling up to reveal Illium's night sky. The second the window moved, dozens of spotlights poured in, illuminating the blue armoured Turian. Once he was sure he'd attached the cable correctly, he approached the window. The doors behind him kicked open, and dozens of police swarmed in accompanied by THOR Mechs, opening fire as he leaped.

He was airborne, zipping past all the fliers before they could react. Archangel counted down the seconds in his head before he activated his armour, the Raptor systems coming to life and providing counter-thrust as he let go of the cable and flew on his own. He slowed down, but it wasn't enough to completely stop the descent. He came flying down into Illium's under streets, impacting on the ground with a hard thud and shattering the concrete underfoot. From there, it was simply a matter of disappearing into the night.

\* \* \*

><p>It was Augmentation Day, and one was left hoping for the best results. The results of the Spartan Two program's failures still haunted Doctor Halsey to this day, and there was not a moment when those images sprung to mind that she didn't shiver. Of course, the whole process had been perfected for the third program, which experienced zero wash outs for the now deceased Gamma Company. There was a one hundred percent guarantee that augmentations for the Human subjects would go through without a problem. For the others though, their future was much less certain.<p>

Instead of undertake the Augmentation process aboard a medical ship like the Hopeful under the watch of experts and with plenty of equipment at hand, this time, the Admiral had given orders that it was to take place without leaving the shield world. Everything had been assembled and prepared by Engineers and swarms of micro-Sentinels that ONI was now experimenting with. The facility they had constructed was built to have all the work done by artificial intelligences without the need of any Human expertise or input save for Halsey's own.

ONI grew ever more slack with the UN conventions that restricted what AI's could and couldn't do. They seemed to have crossed the line a long time ago, because everything was automated and the Spartan program's staff was only a tenth of its size when it was on Reach, everything cut down to just Halsey, Tammerson and his trainers; a select dozen Spartan III's, and a few more ONI staff. All the logistics was handled by AI's and Engineers.

That made everything all the more quiet as the days passed by, Halsey unaccompanied save for the half dozen AI's constantly moving about the facility. There was occasionally a squad of ONI agents patrolling silently, but there was nothing else. She drifted from section to section, watching. The primary surgery had been initiated several hours ago, and now it was only a matter whether they would survive tonight and the smaller procedures tomorrow.

Ann had assured Halsey that everything would be fine, then disappeared off somewhere else. That left the doctor only to check over her notes and wait for results. There were the original candidates, who despite the painful process, were guaranteed to graduate from the program with a hundred percent rate of success. That didn't mean they were still suffering immensely. While many augmentations had been phased out to a more gradual upgrade over the years through certain chemical injections, the mechanical side of things was still left up to this day.

While the Human Augmentations were tested and proven, the others were something completely new. The advantage of the massive computing power available to on Trevelyan was that the AI had accurately simulated everything down to a particle level. Even after all those calculations, they were completely unprepared for the final effects. While things were somewhat under control in that there weren't any wash outs yet, some enhancements were dangerously going beyond expectations.

Halsey left worrying behind, trying to focus on what was important. She was still bitter after Parangosky ordered that they deploy within two months time no more. Everything had been accelerated and plans had to be finalized.

The new class of armour systems was already being finalized and prepared to move into production. The new third generation armour did everything the first generation did: increased strength, speed and endurance, but also phased out the crippling specialization in the second generation systems. One of the many flaws in the forth Spartan program was the development of modifiable armour to fit certain tactical roles. This supposed upgrade needed to be rid of. While it was true for standard infantry that they needed assigned roles, a Spartan needed to be able to fight any battle and perform every task



with absolute efficiency. Thus, the third generation Mj  lnir Armour only had one universal archetype of features that would be incorporated into the necessary sub-models.

Ann liked to point out it also tidied up the budget considerably. For the forth Spartan program, they'd invested all the money in armour systems whereas it would have usually be spent on a lifetime of training, ONI hoping that technology would prove the greater strength. It hadn't in the end.

Halsey inspected the prototype suit, and stared into the empty visor. A suit of Armour like this would have been indestructible on the battlefield during the Covenant War, but the tireless effort to grow ever more proficient in killing each other marched on, now it was quite level with what the first generation of Mjolnir had been, powerful but not invincible. These suits however, would be assembled with so much more ease.

Over the years, she'd most certainly been interested in Trevelyan's capabilities, but she never was able to grasp the full output of the Shield World. It seemed here, ONI could manufacture whatever pleased them. It was all done by Engineers and a Sentinel workforce, who worked constantly throughout the Dyson Sphere. This place alone could rival the output of Citadel space, and it was all in ONI hands. The universe be thankful that ONI had never successfully captured any more Shield Worlds. The Forerunner technology here was beyond anything else. If she ever did die, she'd imagine doing it by overloading the Shield World's systems and taking this entire place with her. Nobody, especially Parangosky and her faceless goons, could be trusted with such power.

It made her wonder why they needed a Spartan program in the first place if this Shield World could manufacture enough Sentinels to swarm entire worlds. ONI needed something. Wanted something. It was a thought to muse as she filed the final plans for the new Mj  lnir Generation Three, Mark One.

\* \* \*

><p>Garrus took off the helmet and placed it down on the desk. He sighed and reclined back into the chair, looking over the latest information he had acquired. Cooper was in with someone certainly, because the hard-drive of that data-pad was filled with images of symbols that matched that Garrus had seen before on the Reaper they boarded on the day they found Legion. It was eerily similar and he wondered how far this lead would really take him. First of all, he needed an expert because he couldn't make sense of Reaper language, a leftover of their Leviathan roots. Well, maybe there was someone who could.<p>

He ignored the fact that his OMNI-Tool was bleeping with a priority message, and working away at the terminal. He brought up that Extranet address and mused over it. Maybe he needed to take a few necessary risks to get things done and if they pointed him in the correct direction the first time around, then maybe they might be useful allies for now. He sent all the files onward to Cerberus. They might help and he could deal with them later if that was needed.

Finally he grew sick of the bleeping and turned off the OMNI-Tool.

Priority messages from the Council be damned, he had a mission to attend to. Turning back to the Terminal, he saw that a circular button had popped up on screen. Not having time to waste, he pressed it and a text box appeared.

\_"Activate the OMNI-Tool, will you? I don't have time to waste either."\_

Garrus activated the OMNI-Tool and it projected a hologram of a person he hadn't seen in years. Liara hadn't aged however, still the same as ever.

"Don't you at least answer any calls now, Garrus?"

"Well, not when I'm in a bad mood," Garrus answered, forming a weak smile. "Of course, these days, not many helpful people tend to call. I've been working out a few important leads recently. Spectre business."

"The fact that I have no clue to where you are or what your doing, means that unlike your fellow Spectres, you actually know how to cover your tracks," Liara told him, the hologram folding her arms. "Illium I presume. Something to do with the reappearance of Archangel, am I right?"

"That's already making the rounds?" Garrus asked. "Damn, that was quick. It was only a few hours ago."

"By now anybody with an Extranet connection knows," Liara told him. "I read the report by Illium authorities though. A company of Eclipse mercenaries dead as well as the murder of the Director of Sernice Arms. Brutal murder that is. What went on?"

"Things went bad," Garrus said. "Out of hand. Let's leave it and that. I hope you didn't just call to make sure that our resurrected Archangel was authentic?"

"No, unfortunately not," Liara replied. "Recently, a force of unknown Human mercenaries attempted to steal the Normandy from a concealed shipyard in the Viynai System. EDI managed to force a lock down and launch the ship, but the Normandy hasn't reported in since. Garrus, this is the most significant breach in security I've ever faced. The exact coordinates of that shipyard was only known to me and EDI. It was assembled by VI's in the middle of nowhere. Somehow they found out about it. That means they have direct access to the Shadow Broker Network."

"You want me to do something about it?" Garrus questioned. Old friends they were sure, but he wasn't exactly in the business any more of protecting what was practically a criminal enterprise. Hell though if some mercenaries thought they could get their hands on the Normandy.

"No, I came to warn you. If they know about the Normandy, then they likely know everything. I can only hope that their access was limited. One thing I can confirm stolen however, was something they took and deleted. The reports I'd sent Shepard just a week before his death. The one concerning invisible ships and rift anomalies. I've investigated the full depths of this, Garrus. They have infiltrated all systems and uncovered our every secret. The priority message on

your OMNI-Tool is from the Council summoning all Spectres to return to the Citadel. I'm sorry, but this warning is a bit too late."

"What's happening?"

"Whoever attacked the Normandy is planning to do the same to the Citadel. Right now, a ship has emerged from a rift anomaly just beyond the Mass Relays in the Widow System, and it is now bound for the station. You need to get there immediately."

"An attack?" Garrus questioned, standing up.

"Certainly, yes," Liara told him, distracted by something out of the picture. After a momentary pause to read something, she resumed. "The Normandy has now been reported to have appeared in the trade lanes, bound for the Relays that will take it to the Widow Nebula. There are two more ships out there too, both of them also inbound. That makes it a four ship assault as far as I can see. You don't have any time to waste. You need to get to the Citadel. Find Tali. She's our best hope in this."

"Tali?" Garrus questioned, thinking he hadn't heard that last sentence right. "What does she have to do with this?"

"I can't tell you more, not with this line of communication insecure" Liara answered. "Trust me on this, I don't even know for certain myself yet. It's just that when this all breaks loose, we need her to help us. Forget the attackers and anything that Council requests. Do not trust anyone you meet. Get her off the Citadel. This means everything."

"I'm on my way now," Garrus took the OMNI-Tool with him, returning to go the cockpit of his small craft and setting a course straight for the Citadel. "Anything else?"

"I won't be able to help, not with the network compromised," Liara told him. "Sorry, but I wish you good luck. You'll need it."

\* \* \*

><p>"Be proud of this day," Tammerson said, standing behind the podium. "Today, you have proven yourself worthy. Today you have proven yourself able to serve. You have endured impossible exercise and undergone unbeatable simulations, only to best them. That was only the training. Today, you will go forth and face the real thing."<p>

They all stood at complete attention, every Spartan standing ready. They all knew the risks, but they had survived. All five hundred Spartans stood at attention, not one left behind.

"Augmentation has rendered you stronger, faster and more agile," Tammerson continued. "Armour shall enhance you even further, but it is impossible to not mistake that is training, diligence and comradeship that makes the Spartans the best fighting force in the galaxy. I am proud to have trained such an exceptional unit. Right now, I'm sure Doctor Halsey has a few words to say as well."

"Indeed I have," Doctor Halsey said, as she stepped in. "ONI has seen

fit to immediately deploy you. I can only assume that their need is great. In the next few coming months, I'm sure you'll have the chance to prove yourself on the battlefield. For now, we are moving onto the stage of rolling out the MjÄlnir Armour systems over the next few weeks."

"It'll take time for everyone to get used to using the MjÄlnir Tammerson told them. "Eventually, it'll become almost like a second skin to you all. Over the next few weeks, you'll have some time to adjust."

"Captain, there is something here you should see," an ONI technician passed on a data-pad to Captain Tammerson. After surveying it for a few seconds, he scowled and handed it back. Though Baal didn't have time to glimpse what it read, he recognized the obvious shape of the Citadel amongst the Widow Nebula.

"Looks like there won't be any down time at all. The accelerated schedule is being accelerated. We're moving to armor up Spartans, today. Everything is at stake."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterward:<strong>

\*\*Sorry for the delay on this chapter after quite a lot of ambitious promises on the last chapter, but I had things to do during the week and I got hit by a bad case of writer's block. As much as it is to do something productive, I needed a week to just cool down and relax for once in a while. This chapter takes the pace up quite a bit, and brings us straight to the Finale of the First Act. Since I had trouble with this particular chapter, I've actually already got a few thousand words done on Chapter Ten. I kind of zipped through the Augmentation and Armour up scenes to get to what were about to go through next chapter. Everything is aligning perfectly...  
\*\*

\*\*Weighing in on the continued ME-Halo debate, yes, I don't believe that the views put forward by the characters are absolutes, but rather their opinions. Factually, one must acknowledge that weaponry utilized by the Citadel species in the field are light years ahead of the UNSC. Mass accelerated rounds compared to plain old bullets? Sure, either could kill you, but an Avenger M-8 will sure do more damage than a MA5B. \*\*

\*\*Also, I had to acknowledge the technological advances the UNSC will have had to have made with access to Forerunner technology. Sometime also, I'm going to detail the effect that reverse engineered Reaper technology has had on the Citadel governments. So really, excluding the actual working Forerunner artifacts like Trevelyan/Oynx, both sides are fairly equal.  
><strong>

\*\*Stay tuned for next chapter, as everything will be on the line...\*\*

## 14. X - Thermopylae

\*\*Chapter X: Thermopylae\*\*

\* \* \*

><p><em><em><em>"I believe the future shall judge us for the events of that day. No doubt, they will condemn us as if we were the devil incarnate. But there is one thing necessary to put this into perspective and that is we did it without a choice. We had no choice but to fight. We simply had no idea that we weren't the only ones manipulating the galaxy.<em>\_\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Minus Three Hours<em>\_\_\*\*

The Phoenix emerged out of Slip-Space, the Freighter drifting into the Widow Nebula. The shutters rolled up, revealing what lay outside. They looked down and saw the full majesty of the Citadel before them. Around the massive space station, hundreds of ships were drifting, either commercial freighters or warships. Here they were at last.

"I'm reading no signs of echoing," their navigation officer reported. "No Slip-Space echoes at all save our own."

"That'd be impossible," Captain James Eldred answered, looking at the screen. "A civilization this size couldn't get by without Slip-Space."

"We were looking for a surprise, uncle," Lissa commented, still in awe.

"Well, if they can build all this without going faster than light, then I'm sure there'll be many more surprises," Eldred answered.

"We've received a communication's package, Captain," Navigation again reported, the man doubling on the small ship as communications. "We're being directed to dock with the ring central to the station. We'll be greeted there and immediately go onto undertaking the Council's plan."

"Bring us in," Eldred ordered.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Minus Two Hours<em>\_\_\*\*

"I repeat, you are not cleared to land," traffic control insisted. "All docks are in lock-down for the next twelve hours, do you understand?"

\_"Traffic Control, we cannot acknowledge that," \_the freighter Yiomani insisted. \_"We have an emergency situation. There will be a bigger disaster if we aren't allowed to dock. Our systems are about to overload unless we shut them down and we cannot drift with them disabled either. Please clear us for landing."\_

"Fine, we acknowledge that, Yiomani," the traffic controller worked

away on the holographic display, clearing the freighter to dock with the Citadel. "Proceed to dock seven-zero-four, power down and await emergency response."

"Thank you very much, control. Proceeding to land," \_Yiomani answered. The traffic controller sighed, disabling communications.

"Rust buckets like that shouldn't be allowed near the station," he complained, "especially when they're a damn danger to go up right above us."

"You think you have problems?" his co-worker answered. "Dozen ships showed up all claiming to be Spectres. Had to have them all pass security checks for them all to land. Then we have that giant floating piece of metal that's docked with the Presidium itself! Just what the hell is going on this week?"

"Whatever it is, I don't like it."

There was a hammering at the door, and the controller looked up at the monitor. There were four C-Sec agents outside, the leader waving his badge. He hit the controls for the sealed door to open and the second those officers stepped inside, they pulled out their weapons.

"Wait, no!"

A shotgun went off.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Minus Five Minutes  
<em>\_\_\*\*

They all stood among the crowds that flooded the Presidium. It was probably the most populous the place had been since the Citadel's old glory days. Tali stood among a dozen fellow representatives of the nations aligned with the Citadel Council. They were off to the side of course, a mere symbolic gesture as the Council stood much more closer. Before the stage were hundreds of reporters all training their vision upward as they waited for the announcement rumored to be made for the past few days.

Finally, the Councillors approached the podium and Councillor Dominic Osoba spoke.

"You have long waited to hear what we have to say here," Osoba told them, "but today, it is not the Council's role to tell you. We have been in communication with one captain, named James Eldred, a representative of a world unknown to us. We believe that he best knows what you need to hear. We welcome the Captain unto the stage.

His appearance was much more surprising than this. An elderly Human in a sandy-colored jacket stood up and approached the podium, escorted by two guards in rather anarchic armor.

"Hello," the Ambassador stated, looking down at the paper in front of him. "My name is Captain Eldred of the Phoenix, representing the

people of the world of Venezia. I was personally hesitant to do this, but those important have asked me to to speak to you today. To illuminate you to something. See, where I come from is somewhere else entirely. There, mankind is enslaved. Mankind is enslaved to a system and-

At that very second, a bullet went through Eldred's skull and the man fell. It was in that split second, a portion of time that seemed to stand still. It was that moment where everything flashed before you. When you were wrestling hand to hand with a Husk in some muddy pit on Earth. When you almost got your head torn off by Rachni. When you were an inch away from having your head blown off by a Geth Sniper. It was that very moment and there was another sniper today. It was in that second you acted and survived.

Tali threw herself forward, knocking into someone; anyone, to save them, and they both fell just as two bullets whizzed through the air, just grazing her kinetic barriers which flared up. That next second, the explosions went off and everything became so very blurry.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Zero Hour<em>\_\_\*\*

It happened all across the Citadel. The rebel freighter exploded as an ONI Prowler fired a rain of missiles from under the darkness of Active Camo. The ship caught fire, flaring up before exploding in nothing but debris.

Baal opened fire on the guards such as the Phoenix exploded. The mass accelerated rounds cut through the non-shielded Insurrectionist troopers like scissors through paper. They screamed out while their comrades ducked into cover, returning fire with MA5B Assault Rifles. May was right behind him, using her Biotic powers to lift the rebels off the ground before pummeling them into the ground. Vicus stood back, calmly picking off the few that remained.

Within a few seconds, twenty rebels had been slaughtered by a four-man fire-team of Spartans. Tempest Squad moved up, finishing off some lingering rebels who'd barely survived the fall; their bones shattered. They moved to the nearby elevator, moving away from where the rebel guards formally guarded the entrance to the Phoenix's docking bay and towards the upper levels of Presidium.

As the elevator moved, Lena unfolded and prepared a Viper Sniper Rifle, putting in anti-personnel rounds. It was assembled by time the elevator doors rolled open and Baal unloaded his rifle in the waiting C-Sec officers. A few managed to return fire but Tempest made quick work of the unarmored police. With them cleared aside, they moved to rally point Bravo, where ten squads worth of Spartans had assembled. Each team detached a sniper, in Tempest's case being Lena. The Quarian took her position among the higher levels of the Presidium along with nine other Spartans, already selecting and picking off targets ranging from C-Sec Commanders to surviving Ambassadors.

The rest of the strike force split into two columns, one heading to assault the Citadel Archives and loot it for items ONI had labelled worthwhile for research while the other half went straight to strike at the Spectre Offices to destroy whatever was left of the Citadel's Special Forces capabilities that weren't massacred on the ground a

moment ago.

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: One Minute  
<em>\_\_\*\*

Debris was strewn all across the Presidium and visibility had gone to hell. Dust that had sat undisturbed for months was finally given the shove and was everywhere. Even with his helmet already on, Garrus couldn't see anything beyond twenty meters. Civilians, C-Sec Officers and others lay incapacitated, still stunned by the explosion. Then the bullets came, whizzing through the whirlwind of chaos and cutting down everyone present.

Then came the noise of thousands shouting, yelling and screaming accompanied by the hail of gunfire. The mob surged away from the massacre, almost running over Garrus who stood his ground. He wanted to upholster his side-arm and return fire but there were too many still in his way and he couldn't get a look on where the attack was coming from. The Turian charged forward, shoving every in his path aside as he pushed his way to the stage. It had been the center of the explosion that looked like it had done more to confuse than to kill.

The sandy-grey armored guards stumbled back to their feet, raising their bulky assault rifles before they were gunned down by panicky C-Sec Officers, who turned their weapons on the arrivals. It had escalated into a firefight now, with a voice screaming at them to cease fire. Garrus was forced to duck behind the podium as bullets impacted on his kinetic barriers. He looked around and saw a C-Sec Officer fall, the blood spluttering off his neck indicating a bullet that came from above. The C-Sec Officers began falling in droves now as so did the ambassadorial guards.

Garrus cursed, looking for anyone. He only could spot some of his fellow Spectres he'd worked with on earlier missions lying dead in the ambush. Otherwise, he couldn't see anything. He decided at this moment, the best option was to fall back and out of this killing field. Garrus spun around and ran back the way he came across the Presidium plaza, gunfire following him.

"Dammit! Cease fire!" a familiar voice shouted as a few C-Sec Officers took pot-shots at the Turian Spectre. Garrus headed straight for that voice, ducking behind cover beside him.

"Bailey," Garrus noted, the C-Sec Executive crouching there along with a few other surviving C-Sec Officers.

"What the hell is going on?" Bailey questioned, firing out from cover. "We're being attacked from everywhere."

"We need to fall back," Garrus told him, "get out of the open."

"What do you think I've been doing?" Bailey shouted back at him. "We need to rally somewhere."

There was a thud and another C-Sec Officer collapsed, a bullet going straight through his helmet. Bailey cursed.



"Get out of here! Go, go!" Bailey screamed, waving them back as they retreated out into a corridor. Assault rifle fire followed, cutting down a few unarmored officers as they ran. Garrus grabbed Bailey and placed himself between the Executive and the incoming fire, managing to protect him as they got into a corridor and out fire.

They raced down the corridor, seeing an elevator been held open by a waiting C-Sec Officer. Garrus and Bailey quickly bordered the elevator, which the Turian officer immediately punched in the button for the top level of C-Sec Headquarters. Bailey breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was close," Bailey muttered.

"There's likely more," Garrus told him. "There won't just be a dozen. If this is an attack, they'll be in the hundreds."

"I'm aware," Bailey told him before turning around. "Officer. Where are you from?"

"42nd Response Team, sir," the officer answered, gripping his M-8 Avenger.

"The response teams?" Bailey said. "There're already on site? Good. Maybe we have better chance of putting this down now."

"Sorry, but I don't recognize you sir," The officer responded.

"I'm the god damn head of C-Sec," Bailey told him. "You must be green not to know that."

That immediately had the officer throw the end of his rifle into Bailey's face. He saw it coming and threw himself back, but wasn't quick enough in time to avoid being smashed across the face and sent tumbling to the ground. Garrus immediately jumped on the rogue officer, who struggled against him. Their traitor spun around and sent Garrus flying into the side of the lift, cracking the steel. The Spectre didn't go down, but immediately got back up and tackled the rogue officer. They struggled again, and the traitor slowly got Garrus into a choke-hold.

Garrus's mind raced, with fury and terror. He was bloody tough dammit and had wrestled with Reaper husks who held nothing back, but this green Turian who shouldn't be even out of boot-camp yet must have had bones of titanium. The traitor slowly tightened his hold and Garrus began to choke. Spluttering for air, he slowly began to stop struggling.

He had never been more pleased to hear that elevator door ping in his life. It rolled open to reveal half a dozen C-Sec officers.

"Kill em!" Bailey shouted from down on the ground, pointing at the rogue officer. The C-Sec squad opened fire with pistols. Their attacker tossed Garrus to the ground and took his own rifle, opening fire. While rounds aimed at their traitor were continuously were soaked up by his kinetic barriers, the C-Sec officers were torn to pieces. They died there and then, but it bought them time. Garrus threw all his might behind his legs and kicked the ankles of their traitor, who collapsed to the ground.

"Out now!" Garrus stumbled to his feet and chucked Bailey out the door, hitting the button for the bottom floor before slipping out the closing doors. The elevator went downward, cutting them off from their attacker for now. Bailey limped over to beside the fallen officers and knelt down, looking at their wounds.

"Dead," Bailey muttered, "all of them dead."

"We need to move on," Garrus told him, not trying to think of the implications from what he just encountered. He had wrestled with probably the strongest opponent he'd ever encountered, who hit his targets every time and had better equipment to boot.

"Yes," Bailey answered, standing back up. "Come on. This way."

They rushed down the corridor and ran into about a few dozen C-Sec officers pointing rifles at them.

"Stand down," the leading officer; a Commissioner, ordered.

"Executive Bailey? I'm glad you showed up. We're being attacked from everywhere."

"Whoever was guarding the elevators just shot dead, Commissar," Garrus told him. "Lock them down."

"Do it," Bailey added. A nearby C-Sec officer typed away at the console, locking down the lifts and also sealing the door behind them. Garrus didn't like it. They stood in the same area where Thane had died at the hands of that Cerberus assassin. It was littered now with a dozen dead bodies of C-Sec staff. The blinds had been rolled down, protecting them from outside eyes.

"Give me an update," Bailey ordered him.

"I have no clue. All our communications are jammed. The emergency line has been cut too," the Commissioner explained. "With what's going on outside, it's best you look yourself."

He flicked on a surveillance screen. A camera looked down over the entire Praesidium and showed what was going on below. From what he was seeing, it wasn't much a battle and more like a massacre of loyalist forces. Squads of C-Sec Officers were gunned down by their own comrades and snipers picked off everyone not taking cover. Garrus growled, his mind racing to figure out the situation. He remembered what he'd been told and immediately knew what he had to do.

"Bailey," Garrus shouted. The C-Sec officer continued to sway, staring off into the distance and not answering. He couldn't bring his eyes away from it. No doubt there was repeats of the Cerberus incursion going on in his head as well as the fall of the station to the Reapers. "Snap out of it!"

"Yes," Bailey answered, still not looking away from the violence going on down below. "What the hell are we supposed to do? They're everywhere."

"We need to insure the safety of the Council and the Ambassadors," Garrus told him. "If my fellow Spectres are still holding position,

then they'll be pinned down in the old Embassies. We need to break through to that position."

"I don't know what'll be worse," Bailey muttered, "being shot by traitors along the way or being shot by our own side when we poke out heads out."

"They'll know who we are," Garrus insisted. "I'll lead this. Saving them is our top priority."

"We're with you, sir," the C-Sec Commissioner told him. Bailey sighed.

"Of course," Bailey answered, "we'll support you. Now what do you want us to do exactly?"

"Commissioner, take ten officers and secure the C-Sec Academy lobby," Garrus ordered him. "Sit tight and wait for us. I want a clean escape route to the docking bay and some shuttles. If you can, rally as many officers as possible. Meanwhile, I'll lead the rest of us across the plaza and to the Embassy. I've got the equipment to distract those snipers."

"Yes sir," the Commissioner answered and pointed to a nearby squad. "You men, with me."

"I guess I'll be helping you lead this movement," Bailey told him, checking over his own pistol. "We're about forty strong. Since everyone knows me, hopefully we'll be able to rally a lot more. Now how exactly are we going to not get shot getting to the Embassies?"

"I'll be providing cover fire," Garrus told him, grabbing hold of the Widow Sniper Rifle on his back with one hand and handing over his bandolier with the other hand. "Plus, take my smoke grenades for when things get risky. I have a dozen and they'll be good enough cover."

"Got it," Bailey took the grenades and hefted the serious weight. "I'll trust you to get us across that plaza from here to the Embassies."

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing," Garrus said, checking his rifle. "We're on the same channel. Send a signal when to begin my cover fire."

"Moving then," Bailey told him, and waved for the rest of the C-Sec officers to follow him. "Unlock one of those elevators. All right everyone! We're pulling the diplomats out of the fire. We're going to cross that plaza!"

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><p><strong><em><em><em><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae:  
Ten Minutes<em>\_\_\*\*\_\_\*\*

"Might I say, the exact timing of that bullet was a master stroke," Elisa Thompson commented, already regarding the various images and arranging them on the screens. "I haven't done this work myself for a while, but it may just take another masterful arrangement."

"I wouldn't call it anything today masterful," Curtyn replied, sighing and looking out the view screen as the UNSC Cain orbited the Citadel unseen. "I'd call it cutting damn close. It would have been so damn easier if we shot him before this all mess began."

"Ah, but then what would we have, Admiral?" Elisa said, smiling. "It was a god send that Loki stole that transcript that Captain Eldred already submitted to the Council. Now, it has all been perfectly arranged."

A video played out on screen, straight from the cameras in front of the podium. The Insurrectionist Captain coughed, finding his paper and looking down at it. He finally gathered his voice.

\_"My name is Captain Eldred. I was personally hesitant to do this, but those important have asked me to to speak to you today. To illuminate you to something. See, where I come from is somewhere else entirely. There, mankind is enslaved. Mankind is enslaved to a system-" \_

The footage was cut together in a way that suggest C-Sec started moving in before a bullet went straight through him. There were a few underlying changes to the presentation but none detectable by anything less intelligent than an AI that the Citadel species loathed to even look upon. As far as it looked, the captain began making a threat and then was shot by C-Sec as things turned hostile. At the very bottom of the screen, it was proclaimed: Cerberus sends a chilling message. Her work done, Elisa just slid it over and began the upload.

"Take that Loki, and put it on the delay of maybe, ten minutes max until you send it to every major media center. By time the dust settles, the entire galaxy will already be convinced who was really behind the attack today and something tells me there won't be any real news for a few hours yet," Elisa commanded the AI and the work of the Propaganda Department of ONI was done for the day; spinning the news for a whole new populace.

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><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Thirty Minutes  
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Garrus breathed in, poking his rifle out the blinds and looked down the scope. He took the situation in and easily found the enemy snipers. Previously, he'd thought they might be around half a hundred, but from a more analysing search, he could guess that there was in reality, only ten. They were military trained for sure and shot awfully fast, but they were amateurs without experience, or at least experience shooting in an urban environment like the Citadel, where a shot could have come from a million different places.

It wasn't hard to track down where one sniper was positioned. Zooming in, he saw the familiar blue armour of a C-Sec officer, a Salarian wielding a Viper rifle. He certainly wasn't C-Sec from the looks of his hardware; a very high-tech looking headset. He puled the cross-hairs over the officer's head and pulled the trigger.

The shot hit some sort of strange golden kinetic barrier and the

sniper rolled out of sight and into cover. Damn. A shot from a Widow Rifle was usually enough to kill any target. That kinetic barrier had popped though, so next time that sniper wouldn't be so lucky. As predicted, the other snipers failed to locate their attacker.

Garrus targeted again, this time surveying the opposition. He saw a collection of rogue C-Sec officers, a bunch of Humans, Turians and Salarians. He dropped his theory of a Cerberus attack with a few mercenaries thrown into the mix. No, they didn't employ this many of other species. This had to be the Leviathans. How else could they get so many traitors of all species if there wasn't indoctrination at work? If they were attacking the Citadel now, then this could be the fate of the entire galaxy at stake and the Council had refused to listen to his warnings.

"Alright, we're in position," \_Bailey told him.

"Those snipers aren't going down easily as I hoped, but I can distract them," Garrus replied. "You'll be facing whatever ground forces there on the plaza alone. Watch out down there."

"Got you," \_Bailey answered.\_ "Moving now." \_

Garrus covered them, firing at a Human sniper. Again, he hit a kinetic barrier and the Human ducked back into cover. Another sniper took a rough pot shot on their shooter's position, a window not far from Garrus shattering. Withdrawing his rifle, he quickly moved positions to another window further down before taking his next shot. He hit another sniper, sending him tumbling back. He'd gotten their attention now because now they focused all their fire power on him. A bullet whizzed past his head and impacted behind him. Garrus leaped down the floor, taking cover as dozens more followed it up.

"Executive, we are pinned down!" \_the Commissioner communicated to them. \_"We are holding position at the Academy lobby, but we are under attack-" \_The COM went dead silent.

"Commissioner? \_Commissioner\_, are you there?" \_Bailey radioed back with no response.

He moved position again, but they had him covered now. There wasn't a place he could pop up without immediately being hit. There was still sounds of sniper fire and Garrus wondered if they'd switched their attention to Bailey's officers now. He couldn't risk that. Garrus popped out the window again and aimed down the scope. The first sniper he saw was wearing N7 Armour and wielding his own Widow Rifle. Before he could react, a bullet shattered his shields and went straight through his chest. Garrus took a gasp of air and collapsed.

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><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Twenty Minutes  
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She reached over the C-Sec officer's head and wrapped her arms around his neck. He struggled for a brief moment before the Spartan snapped it with an audible crack. Ellie quietly lowered the body to the ground, motioning for the squad to switch back to their silenced

Locust sub-machine guns. The three man Hornet team moved quickly over the bodies and reached their objective, a control panel. Ketei flexed his hands eagerly, punching the lock and smashing the control box open. The Bartarian reached inside and began cutting some wires. After a few seconds, he hit the reset button.

The lights in the service tunnel flicked off and they continued to flick off until everything beyond the Presidium was in darkness. Hornet could already hear the screeching sound of C-Sec vehicles trying to navigate the tunnels. There was no rest of them however, and they immediately moved onward to their next target. Hornet killed two dozen officers between here and there.

They linked up with Paladin Team in a C-Sec vehicle bay filled with already smoldering squad cars. With only a thumbs up, the two teams got to work and hopped aboard two squad cars that Paladin had left untouched when they slaughtered their way through this C-Sec station. They flew out of the now lightness tunnels and into the Presidium, their FOF tags protecting them from friendly fire. The battle waged on around them, across every level of the station.

They touched down at a fortified point where C-Sec was rallying together. The Spartans stepped out the vehicles, as the C-Sec officers raised their weapons. There was a fixed weapons placement that focused on them, enough explosive power to blow up the squad cars and the fake C-Sec agents along with them.

"Identification!" the Asari C-Sec officer shouted at them.

"11th Station, Lower Presidium," Ellie answered, reading aloud the identity of a woman she'd killed less than an hour ago. She held out the identification card. "Captain Marion Bennet."

"Ma'am, we can't be too sure," the nervous Asari officer told her, looking at the tampered with identification card which checked out perfectly. She was still only fifteen but a lifetime of training had made the Spartan a hell of a lot grittier and older looking. With Augmentation, she towered over even the Turian.

"They haven't opened fire on us yet," a Turian officer told her. "If they were traitors, they'd already have shot us by now. Why are you here, Captain?"

"11th Station has been overrun," Ellie told them, her tone never betraying the cover story. "We heard communications from the Executor to rally at the designated points. Whose taken command?"

"Commissioner Theodore, captain," the Turian officer explained, "he's holding down the Academy offices downstairs."

"What's he doing down there?" Ellie questioned.

"I couldn't guess, captain, but I assume it's to clear an access path to the Academy's docking bays," the officer told her. "We're holding position here."

Ellie checked her Head's Up Display, displayed to her eyes directly via implant. Green lights flashed as both Paladin and Hornet confirmed themselves in position. She took a breath for a second,

waiting for the moment before green lighting the movement.

Ketei shot the Asari with full-burst from his Assault Rifle, killing the C-Sec Officer immediately. Ellie did likewise with the Turian, while Paladin secured that fixed-gun placement. Dozens more C-Sec Officers charged out, closing the distance in an attempt to use Humbler-like devices; stun rods. Ellie grabbed the wrist on an incoming Human officer and twisted it, the man screaming out as he released his weapon and Ellie swiped it up. The Spratan immediately swung it and cracked the officer's skull with it.

A Turian barged into her but buckled when Ellie shoved her off, before stunning the C-Sec Officer with a direct strike from the Stun-Baton. Drawing out her combat knife, Ellie slit the Turian's neck while she was still in a daze. Two more officers attacked and Ellie fought them with Baton in one hand and the Combat Knife in the other. It was simply a matter of one hit to stun before finishing them off though most Human officers died on impact of the baton against their weak skulls. Ellie eventually tossed the baton aside, grabbing an officer's arm and yanking it, shattering the bone. As he screamed and collapsed, his comrades started to get the message and ran for their lives, only to be gunned down by Paladin as they turned C-Sec's own defenses around.

Ellie looked and saw Ketei similarly surrounded by fallen C-Sec officers; the Bartarian looking quite pleased. Ellie couldn't help but be happy as well. This is what they were built for, and this is what they lived for.

"Hornet Squad with me," Ellie commanded, "We're going to eliminate that Commissar and close off that route of escape."

\_"All squads be aware, enemy reinforcements have arrived and are inbound in ETA of one hundred. Confirm objectives, now."\_

\_"This is Locust Squad, one Insurrectionist target remaining. We have three other witnesses still on the move. We are moving to eliminate."\_

\_"Roger, Locust. Status of Council?"\_

\_"They've evaded for now, command. Avenger Team shall have it done within ten."\_

\_"Roger. Eliminate all targets then cease offensive action immediately. All non-essential squads are to begin extraction as soon as possible." \_

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><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: One Hour <em>\_\_\*\*

He gasped, reaching out and clutching where the bullet had gone through his armor plate. Garrus quickly activated his OMNI-Tool and applied Medi-Gel, the substance taking the pain away. He stumbled back to his feet, barely able to keep upright.

\_"Hello? Is anybody on this channel? This is Normandy to the Citadel, do you read?"\_ He heard familiar voice and thought he must be imagining it. Ignoring it, he picked his rifle up but the voice

continued. \_"This is the Normandy! Can anyone hear me?"\_

"Joker?" Garrus muttered, activating his communicator. "Is that you?"

\_"Damn straight it's me! Garrus! Just the person I was looking for. We're in need of some help."\_

"Here I was hoping you were the Calvary," Garrus answered. "We're in some trouble too."

\_"We've just come through the Widow Nebula and all channels are shutdown. What's going on?"\_

"It's an attack, just like before," Garrus told him. "Why are you here?"

\_"Well, I've got a big-ass ship on my tail and I thought the safest place in the galaxy might be the place to lose it, but as it turns out, nope. I think I've lost them for now, but there's another similar looking one hanging around beyond the Relays. Hasn't seen us yet though. What can I do for you?"\_

"I need extraction," Garrus told him. "The Citadel fleet is boarding the station to put this thing down, but I need to get out."

\_"All the docks are locked down. There isn't exactly a place for me to toss out the landing plank."\_

"I've got one," Garrus answered, activating his OMNI-Tool and sending him the coordinates. "Be there, exactly in twenty. We'll be waiting."

\_"Ah, I like it. Alright, I'll be there to pull your boots out of the fire one last time."\_

Garrus deactivated the communicator, relieved one bit for small miracles. Private transport out would mean bypassing the security forces flooding into the station. Nobody could be trusted in this situation. He checked over his armor systems and found everything functional. The Medi-Gel had done its job and he had recovered.

Peeking out the blinds, he found that the snipers had gone silent. There were still small firefights raging throughout the Presidium, but the chaos was almost over. Hierarchy troops had already appeared, forcing C-Sec forces to disarm. Garrus knew he didn't have much time left. He activated the Raptor systems and silently wished he'd practiced more. He pulled out his Predator Pistol and shot out the window, then flew through.

He kept the boosters on for five seconds before spacing them out a little, allowing him to drop inch by inch so that he wasn't hundreds of meters above the Presidium's ground level. By time he hit the ground, he'd perfectly spaced out his fuel to allow him to cross half the distance between one wall of the Presidium and the other. Racing across the park lands towards the old Embassies, many C-Sec officers called out for him to freeze and some even fired. He didn't have time to stop.



Outside the embassies, there was a firefight between dozens of C-Sec troops and infiltrators who were slowly withdrawing, but weren't letting up as to allow them to regroup with the special forces squads holding the Embassy lobby. Garrus linked up with Bailey, thankful that he was alive.

"Good to see you made it one piece too," Bailey remarked. "We can't get inside, not with that covering fire on us."

"Whose in there?" Garrus questioned.

"Ambassadors. Council's already gone to be evacuated. I'm assured as long as we keep up the fight, they'll be safe enough," Bailey explained. "Hierarchy troops will be here any second now."

"I'm going in there," Garrus told him. Bailey looked skeptical, but resolved not to question it.

"Alright, we'll cease fire for a short moment," Bailey told him, activating his communicator. "Spectre coming into the lobby. Don't fire on him."

Garrus didn't wait, jumping over the barrier and activating his armor systems to boost across the open ground, evading incoming fire from the enemy. The guards obeyed their commands and allowed him to run into the embassies. Elite Citadel Guard kept their weapons trained on him.

"Spectre Vakarian," the Asari captain spoke up, recognizing him. "It's good that you arrived. Only three Spectres with us are alive."

"What's happened?" Garrus questioned.

"We were split, and infiltrators took us by surprise," the Guard Captain explained. "Spectre Bau is upstairs, keeping watch."

"I'm heading up to see him," Garrus told them, going straight past and up the stairs. He reached the door and hit the control panel, opening it up. Inside the locked down office was a small party of Ambassadors, particularly the Elcor, Geth and then there was Tali; drenched equally in dust and blood.

"Vakarian," Bau greeted him. "I'm glad to see you. Been hell all over again."

Garrus looked around and saw the two other Spectres. The Asari T'neer was still standing while the other, the Turian Kylre was left wounded, leaning against the desk with some serious wounds. Bodies of various Citadel Guard members lay scattered around the room.

"I barely made it," Garrus told him.

"According to records, you weren't even in Citadel Space," Bau replied. "Glad yes, but why are you here? Things are being mopped up far as I'm hearing. Looks like a retreat thus far."

"I have a mission," Garrus said, stepping past. Tali finally turned and looked at him, certainly not amused.

"What are you doing here?" Tali questioned.

"Listen, trust me," Garrus answered. "Liara is sure that you're in danger. We need to get off the Citadel, now."

"I might ask why Liara told you firstly if I'm the one in danger. I think I can handle myself," Tali answered. "I don't think we'll be going anywhere."

"Vakarian, it's advisable that we don't leave this room. It's regulation for the safety of personnel," Bau told him. "You can trust us of all people."

"I do, but I don't trust the people who're coming," Garrus replied. "This isn't a hunch. This is fact. You are in danger, and it's more than just your life on the line. We need to leave."

Tali looked at him, eyes burning behind that mask. It wasn't all hatred, but there was still mistrust. "You're going to explain this when we have time. We're do you think we can escape to?"

"Joker's bringing in the Normandy. We just need to head to the evacuation point," Garrus told her. He was getting frustrated.

"This is out of the question," Bau told him. "As much as I respect your capabilities, you can't go anywhere."

"I'll trust my friend," Tali answered. "If it's dangerous for me to be here, it's best I get out your way. Let's go the Normandy then."

He blinked for a moment, surprised before regaining himself. Garrus nodded a silent thanks and they headed towards the door. Bau grabbed his shoulder.

"First thing's first, I'm not letting you head off alone," Bau told him, turning to his fellow Spectres. "T'neer, you and Kylre can keep watch here. I'm assisting Spectre Vakarian." Bau turned back to Garrus. "Secondly, how you think we're going to get out? You may have gotten past those shooters alive with that gadgetry, but we don't have the same equipment."

Garrus reached down and remembered he was short any smoke grenades. It was a damn miracle that Joker had shown up because no doubt that their escape path to the C-Sec Academy docking bays was no longer secure. He actually had no clue how he'd be able to get them out of here.

"If I may, Spectre-Vakarian," the Geth Ambassador stepped forward. "This platform can draw fire, allowing you to escape."

"Out of the question," Bau answered, "sacrificing-"

"It is not in anyway harmful," the Geth answered. "There is only the minimal programs left inside this platform to keep it running. We retreated to our server before the attack began. This platform is easily replaced. You are not so."

"Alright then," Garrus told them. "You'll draw fire while we head northward, past the C-Sec line. Follow behind me."

They headed down the stairs, passing by the Citadel Guard. They objected, but Garrus told them to hold position.

The Geth Ambassador went out first. Bullets whizzed out, impacting on the Ambassador's considerably shielding. By time those shields collapsed in a hail of incoming fire, Garrus, Tali and Bau slipped out northward and then out of their sights as the Geth platform exploded into a hail of sparks before collapsing to the ground.

Racing past C-Sec, they headed straight for an elevator that would take them downward. All in, Garrus hit the button and they sped away from the Presidium ground floor. Garrus held his rifle firmly, joining with Bau on covering the door. Tali did so too with a Predator pistol. He was sure that Ambassadors were never meant to bear arms on the Citadel, but he was sure that today wasn't the day to adhere to that rule.

The doors opened, revealing an empty corridor. They jogged through another door, bringing them into the Scenic View area that he hadn't visited since he first met Shepard decades ago. From here, you could see all the Wards in their shattered and empty glory. The area was still abandoned, collecting dust.

"The extraction point?" Tali questioned, looking around. "This doesn't go to any docks!"

"We're making an exit here," Garrus told them, activating his OMNI-Tool and jamming the door behind them shut. "Just wait."

A few seconds after, there was a thudding outside. "Whoever's inside! We are Hierarchy forces, and if you do not open that door, we will breach with force!"

"Get ready," Garrus told them, training his weapon on the door.

"But they're Hierarchy!" Tali questioned, not going along with this.

"They aren't," Garrus muttered, aiming down his sights. He'd been Hierarchy, knew protocol on breaching situations and that certainly wasn't it. The door soon sparked as they cut through it, severing the control panel and directly forcing it open. Coming through it were Turians in jet black armor that he'd never seen before, wielding Vindicator Battle Rifles. Certainly not Hierarchy.

Garrus opened fire, cutting one down. The attacker's shields collapsed and bullets went through him. The others pulled back, taking cover beyond the door. Bau and Tali joined in, firing on the attackers. There was a small thump noise downstairs and then the sounds of an explosion. More black-armored soldiers came racing up the stairs.

"There they are! We want the Quarian alive!" one of the soldier's shouted. Tali answered by activating her OMNI-Tool and sending a shock that not only collapsed the soldier's shields, but sent him tumbling to the ground as he lost control of his body. She then activated her Drone, the ball of energy sparking to life and immediately whirling off to charge down some incoming

attackers.

"How long?" Bau questioned.

"Just about a minute," Garrus answered, looking at the time. He stood up and took down another incoming soldier. They kept coming in from all sides, but since they were hesitant to fire, they had a severe disadvantage. A grenade suddenly detonated in the door they'd breached, sending the black-armored soldiers flying into the air before they hit the ground. Out of the smoke came green armored titans, almost half taller than Garrus himself. Their shields shimmered, reflecting light off their golden visors.

Before he had anytime to question this, a familiar ship appeared behind them.

"Get down!" \_Joker warned them, firing off Normandy's anti-personnel guns. One shot landed far from them, shattering the glass. The environment broken, air was sucked out into the vacuum before the safety barrier activated. Another canon shot flew straight past them, going into the far room and exploding. That was enough force to crack armor plating, but the green titans were unaffected, their shields flaring up as they kept going through the flames unscathed.

"Move now, I'm bringing down the barrier," \_EDI told them, the Normandy's landing ramp coming down, giving them access to the shuttle bay. Just as Garrus came to his feet, the kinetic barrier came down. He grabbed both Tali and Bau and used his Raptor armor to boost them forward, carried along by the gust of escaping air. They landed right into Normandy's shuttle bay and the ship went speeding away. Garrus looked back, seeing the green power-armored giants watching them escape just as the landing ramp shut.

"Two attacking forces," Bau commented. "Unlikely, but terrifying. Did you recognize that power-armor? It looked unlike anything I've ever seen before."

"I didn't," Garrus admitted. "I didn't know who either of them were. I do know however, that Sernice provided those C-Sec uniforms used in the attack. Sernice also supplied the Blue Suns on Omega."

"So it's the Leviathans," Tali said.

"It looks so," Bau answered, tossing aside his now broken rifle. "This doesn't look good at all. Let me see what I can find."

Bau activated his OMNI-Tool and scanned it.

"Nice to have you all back aboard again," \_Joker greeted them through the intercom. "Hate to say it, but that ship I mentioned earlier is coming around. We've got to get out of here, so we're heading for the Relay." \_

"Looks like things are clearing up," Bau commented. "Hierarchy forces have boarded, but it seems our attackers have fled to the abandoned districts in the Wards. They're retreating far as we know."

"They aren't retreating," Garrus told him. "They're just coming after us."

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Two  
Hours<em>\_\_\*\*

"Disengage and fall back," Baal commanded, firing a commandeered M-8 Reverent Assault Rifle. The heavy weapon was rapid firing enough to lay down suppressing fire on the incoming attackers; black armored soldiers. What they lacked in skill they made up for in numbers and tenacity. Baal checked his HUD, wary that his shields had fallen to half way point, the lowest since the operation began.

Vicus chucked another Fragmentation Grenade, taking down two of the incoming troopers. Despite their mix of the known species, they definitely weren't forces of the Citadel Council. They disregarded tactics, sometimes charging out of cover at their enemy. Baal continued firing, picking them off as they ran at him.

"Move! Docking bay zero-four-nine, go," Baal told Tempest as they ducked through another doorway, May providing covering fire. There was probably about forty unknown hostiles on them, plus now squads of Hierarchy troops who were joining them.

\_"All fire-teams be advised, extraction is a no go. UNSC Cain has broken off to engage routed enemy ships. You will have to provide your own means to leave the station. A marker should appear directing you to nearby docking bay. Commandeer the enemy vessel known as Yiomani. Confirm that all teams. Move to the Yiomani and pilot it to the designated coordinates." \_

"Tempest Team, we are on our own," Baal told them. "We are hijacking the Yiomani and getting out of here."

\* \* \*

><p><strong><em><em><em>Operation Thermopylae: Four  
Hours<em>\_\_\*\*

\_"You've got to see this. Now." \_Joker told them.

"Alright, I'm patching in," Garrus answered, tapping into his OMNI-Tool. It projected a screen in front of him. The Presidium was a wreck, though crews were already putting out the fires. It seemed the battle was over and he breathed a sigh of relief. The camera swung about as it was set back up, pointed back towards the podium. However, instead of the Council, someone else stood there. Someone else impossible.

"No..." Garrus muttered.

\_"Commander Shepard! Commander!" \_Dozens of voices called out from the crowd, all surrounding the stage. Garrus couldn't believe his eyes. No. It wasn't real. He saw the Widow Sniper Rifle attached to the back of Shepard's N7 Armor and recognized him as the sniper that had wounded him earlier, this time minus the helmet. That thing was not Shepard. It was something else entirely. Behind the false-commander, there was an assembled platoon of those jet-black armored Commandos.

\_"Please, everyone," \_Shepard told them, raising his hands for quiet.

They all obeyed and everything was silent. \_"No doubt there are many questions. I'll do my best to answer as best I can explain."\_

\_"Commander, aren't you meant to be dead?" \_One particular reporter commented, no doubt having been through last time.

\_"An inconvenient ruse, not one I did willingly. The body buried was a fake, you can confirm that if you really want to dig it up. I am Commander Shepard, same as ever. For the past few years, I have worked to uncover a plot against all life. This attack was the works of Reaper indoctrination technology, being wielded by Cerberus. Their audacious ruse here today, had aimed to assassinate the Council and the Ambassadors, plunging us into chaos. Make no mistake, we are at war. Cerberus and their allied anarchist groups are still fully under the sway of the Reapers and they shall never stop seeking to destroy. To counter this threat, as we did today, I have assembled a task-force; Goliath. Over the next few weeks, I plan to work closely with the new Council to initiate a campaign to hunt down Cerberus for good. I swear that this'll be the last time an attack strikes the very heart of civilization-" \_

The screen muted for a second, and Garrus lowered his OMNI-Tool. He hesitantly looked to Tali beside him, who still absolutely still.

\_"I can confirm that scans return positive readings," \_EDI chimed in, though the AI held her own doubts. \_"The duplication is perfect down to every last detail." \_EDI connected to the OMNI-Tool turn the sound back on.

\_"This indoctrination," \_Shepard continued. \_"It is twice so as powerful as anything we've faced before. It has seeped its way through the Citadel and corrupted the upper echelons of security and even the Spectres. That's the reason why my staged death was necessary. Some of my own friends and fellow Spectres have been taken. I will work to hunt them down-" \_

\_"I can quickly summarize," \_EDI interrupted \_"A transmission has already passed through all Council aligned systems, a warrant for your arrest and the capture of the Normandy. All of us, save for Tali however." \_

"I understand that," Bau answered and Garrus remembered his earlier conversation with Liara. This had to be it. "We're just agents of the Council. Accusing an Ambassador however, and you'd have a diplomatic incident with Rannoch. Let me guess-"

\_"Yes, the warrant mentions a hostage situation," \_EDI told him.\_  
"Though from the orders within, I doubt any mission will be carried out by legitimate law enforcement. The capture of the Normandy is assigned to this Goliath task-force, previously mentioned and local forces have been notified not to approach us. Not even the Shadow Broker Network contains any mention of this Goliath group however. Their armor systems are completely custom made." \_

"This is... insane," Tali spoke up, shaking her head. "How can anyone believe this!"

\_"Currently, I'm unaware of reasons why they shouldn't. While it is a

fabrication, the cover-story holds up," \_EDI answered. \_"The Council promised contact with a new Human faction. It's technically not a lie that this faction was Cerberus. The select information being fed to the media spin it that the Captain referred to the Citadel Council in his speech. I've reviewed the footage and found traces of modification. The pitch has been modified for a more threatening tone and in many translations, there a subtle tweaks in interpretation. In the Asari language-group, it sounds like the Captain is making a direct threat."\_

"I..." Tali stuttered, looking away. "We have to go back."

"We can't," Garrus answered. "We're barely evading them as it is."

"I personally don't see the rush," Bau added. "We were attacked, yes, but that won't belay the truth."

"They cannot get away with this!" Tali insisted, almost hysterical now. No doubt that the fake Shepard was just too much. "The Council was about to show us something and the Leviathans spun it exactly how they wanted us to see it and they are using his body!"

"As I said, the Council-" Bau said.

"The Council is most likely dead," Garrus cut him off, sighing.

"The Ambassadors were also briefed as to what is going on," Bau told him.

"They're dead too. The ones we left behind were likely mopped up by those troops posing as Hierarchy soldiers. That leaves us." Garrus answered as he turned to Tali. "Whatever proof died with them and likely, the only one in the galaxy who does know what is going on, is you. So tell me. What is going on?"

"There is another Human faction," Tali told him. Garrus was only puzzled by that. Yes, the System's Alliance claimed to be representative of all Humankind but there were others scattered throughout the Traverse and the Terminus. It wouldn't be that far a stretch that some just flew far away from some Relay when the Reapers came knocking, to settle some distant world.

"There are a lot of colonies," Garrus stated. "So it's a rogue colony?"

"Not a colony," Tali told him, her voice cold as she explained. "An empire, vast in scale. Hundreds of worlds and a massive military presence. As far as we know, one that is tyrannic in nature and has no interest in diplomacy. You are either a part of the empire, or your their enemy. That's what that ship told the Council in long-distance communications before they arrived. The Council planned that Eldred be the one to tell the public, unaided, so this would be seen as their plea and not Council politics. The Leviathans for some reason, didn't want that to happen."

"It was the perfect assault," Bau stated, his reptilian eyes wide as he put it together. "An assassination force posing as C-Sec Officers, who are then driven off by a task-force led by this false Shepard, who come in at the perfect time to fill the power vacuum. Insultingly

simple really. I'd be surprised if the STG didn't figure this out in seconds."

"But can they figure it out when they don't know that the Cerberus cover story is a fake?" Garrus questioned. Bau was a bit shocked.

"I guess not," Bau said, "cover story weak and without substance. It would be investigated, but Salarian Intelligence believe we know everything about Human movements. Every world and ship position. They would literally have no idea that more exists. That would leave Cerberus as the only possible culprit."

"So it really is that bad," Tali muttered, shaking her head. "What are we going to do?"

"We know the truth now," Garrus answered. "We'll just go spread it."

\_"It'd be good if you got up here," \_Joker told them.

"Come on," Garrus told them, moving to the elevator to go up to the bridge. Crossing the empty command center, they reached the cockpit where Joker and EDI continued to fly the Normandy. "Situation update?"

"Bad news," Joker replied. "We can't outrun them. Every time we jump, they get there first."

"Our fuel capacity is almost near empty," EDI added in. "We no longer have the fuel for no more than one inter-system jump. We need to reach the Relay now."

"Bring us in then," Joker answered, taking the Normandy out of Faster-Than-Light right in front of a Mass Relay. While usually is should have been a straight run through, it wasn't. Garrus stared. A ship about half a kilometer in length was parked itself in front of the Relay, cutting them off. The Normandy immediately evaded, diving down to avoid being torn to pieces by incoming canon-fire. The frigate spun, dodging a missile that sped past.

"Dammit!" Joker shouted, taking them back around to try and enter the Relay from the other side. A missile exploded, not a direct hit, but enough kinetic force to send the Normandy into a roll, sending the ship off-course.

"Our engines ave been damaged," EDI notified them. "We are unable to correct starboard course."

"We're not dead yet!" Joker answered, spinning them back around to dodge another missile.

"Another anomaly," EDI warned. Soon enough, another ship roughly the same size leaped out of a blue tear in space. Garrus knew for that moment that they were done for. Blasted apart in the cold vacuum of space was not how he thought he'd go. The enemy ships guns all lit up.

The new ship exploded into a rain of fire, as their original attacker fired upon the new arrival. Explosions rippled along the hull, destroying the guns before they could be brought to return fire. The



arrival, damaged, immediately went to escape. Another blue portal appeared and the ship jumped right back in, disappearing into the void. The victorious ship drifted away from the Relay now, closing in on the Normandy.

"Judging by that display of firepower, if they wanted the Normandy destroyed, they would have done so long ago," EDI commented. "I suggest we power-down, then pass them towards the Relay when they move in."

"We'll do it," Joker answered, punching in new commands. The Normandy's engines went off-line, and so did the stealth suite that kept them safe from lock-on missiles. Garrus hoped they were right about that theory, or they'd just made themselves a whole lot easier to kill. Surely enough though, the attacking ship drifted closer without firing. Soon, it was almost upon them. "Ready to get going?"

"Systems are-" EDI cut off, the platform flinching. "I appear to have lost control of the secondary engine systems through an override. Our systems are compromised and I am countering. They're completely off-line."

"How about primary? An FTL Jump?" Joker asked.

"If we FTL Jump now, it's likely we won't be able to make another one," EDI answered, turning to face them. "We are incapable of escaping."

"Then we'll have to resist the old fashion way," Bau told them, holding up his rifle. "How many of them do you think can be on that one ship?"

"A previous encounter suggest two hundred soldiers with superior technological capabilities," EDI explained. "Odds of survival are unlikely."

"Stand down, Bau," Garrus told him. "We'll do this without violence."

"I don't think they have talking in mind, Vakarian," Tali coldly answered.

"We'll take our chances," Garrus said. "Surrender it'll be."

\* \* \*

><p><em>I guess I should thank you for what you did today, Admiral and all those Spartans should be thanked as well. This operation went beyond expectations. The enemy was destroyed and without a single causality among the deployed forces. We have decapitated the last possible chance to ignite a First Contact scenario and have bought ourselves the valuable time we needed What is more disturbing however, is that a new enemy has revealed itself. I want you to gather all Intel possible before you present your findings this time in twenty four hours.<em>

\_The Leviathans plot similarly to us, and have even decided to aid our scheme to further their own agenda, but the only things we have in common is a supplier of illegal arms and military gear. Those

creatures posses some sort of physic power, similar to what was experienced from a Flood Gravemind; perhaps they have similar roots. What we do know about these creatures is their capabilities and intent. As long as they exist, they will continue their efforts to infiltrate nations and seek control. They intend to destroy the basic fundamental concept that we as humankind hold most dear and that is the freedom of our minds.\_

\_From this moment forth, new resources will be dedicated to countering this menace. The Leviathans are a clear and present threat to all worlds under the United Nations Space Command and we shall annihilate them from the galaxy. I hope you are able to gather some much needed Intel, Admiral, because a whole new front has opened in this invisible war.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterward:<strong>

\*\*HURRAH! The end of Section I on a cliffhanger of magnificent proportions and everything up in the air as this plot goes into overdrive. Of course, not everything has been made clear. There is much awaiting in the next chapter at the beginning of Section Two: Insurgency. There of course is a few strings of plot dangling to be solved in the future. What is the connection between all of this? There is a much more sinister plot lurking and not everyone is telling the whole truth. \*\*

\*\*Also, I have no doubt this story will reach the milestone of two hundred reviews this chapter, so celebrations are in order for that as well! Thank you for all your feedback and comments on his work! It is the views that make writing this story meaningful for me and I hope for that to continue for many chapters to come. \*\*

## 15. XI - Normandy

\_\*\*Act II: Insurgency\*\*\_

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><p><strong>Chapter XI: Normandy<strong>

\* \* \*

><p><em>SYSTEM TIME: 28th June, 2577 (UNSC Standard Military Calendar)<em>

\_Communication Channel Alpha, Communique 81263A7  
>Classification Level: Psi<em>

\_\_Sender: Doctor Catherine Halsey  
>Location: Starford Facility, Trevelyan, Onyx, Zeta Doradus System<em>\_

\_\_\_\_Receiver: \_Vice Admiral Ned Rich\_  
><em>Location: Research Station One, Demeris Debris Field<em>\_\_\_\_\_

\_I am pleased to hear that command think highly of my Spartans and the capabilities they displayed in Operation Thermopylae. Anything,

even a single casualty, would have been unacceptable. The fifth generation was built to regain the capabilities that have been lost in the past decades where the previous generations have been deemed obsolete. They are stronger, faster and more smarter than any other fighting force in the galaxy. As I said, anything less would have been a failure.\_

\_It would be my humble request that I remind you that we still need time. While yes, the operation was a success, it was our Spartans against a police force in an ambush, while at the same time wearing said force's own uniforms. It was guaranteed to be a victory but when the Spartans faced elite special forces units such as the Citadel Guard and Spectre Operatives, they had far less success. What we have seen thus far is hardly telling of the true heights these Spartans are able to achieve and the fact that they need more time to accomplish lower-level missions before command thinks they can face down every nation in Citadel space with only a few hundred Spartans.\_

\* \* \*

><p>"All squads assigned to boarding, report to Airlock Bravo," Kelly commanded. "Stand by for further orders."<p>

Everything was underway, with Spartans rushing to their positions. All the motion and sound was unnoticeable. Maybe it was the age. Sixty-something years old didn't make the mandatory retirement age for officers in either the UNSC or ONI by a long shot, but rarely could seniors they be found outside ships, training camps and comfortable desk jobs. The Human body still had limits, even that of a Spartan. This entire campaign seemed an exercise in accepting that, no matter how infuriating.

She looked across the CIC, a number of Spartans were working away at their positions. Kelly attempted to remember which squad had rotated onto this position this week, but couldn't. They did their jobs and manned the various stations, no matter how ill-trained they were at using them at first.

"Report progress," she ordered.

"We have an ETA of four minutes until boarding teams enter that corvette," one Spartan answered, rechecking the COM gear. "Scimitar Team are on point and are awaiting the go ahead."

"Good. Continue to scan for any other ships in the area," Kelly said, mulling over facts. They'd already fired a dozen warning shots at civilian vessels who'd attempted to approach the Relay and they'd all retreated. There was an estimated four hours until a Citadel fleet came to dislodge them so it was about time this was wrapped up. Squads were standing by to board and secure the enemy corvette that they now had managed to secure.

"Ma'am, the Corvette is communicating" the Spartan manning the ill-used communication station reported. "We've blocked the signal, but its apparently a surrender."

Kelly contemplated it for a moment, the decision-making process that she'd become experienced with handling over the past few years. John and Kurt had made leading a team through do or die situations look

easy, whereas now, she could only feel annoyed by the lack of guidance when there were no indicators to the right decision.

"Are we able to respond?" She asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Their shipboard computer is translating," communications answered. Kelly made the choice. Command had never told them to take prisoners, nor did they ever state that they should not take prisoners at all. From a lifetime of combat, her first instinct was that a surrendered enemy was just an enemy trying to trick them. However, there were tactical benefits to keeping the enemy alive. If this ship had such a high priority value for ONI to capture, then surely its crew must be just as useful. They could be delivered to Section Zero along with the ship.

"Send a message. Order that they assemble all aboard the ship in their hanger-bay. Any found outside that hanger or those who resist will be shot. If this is a trick of any kind, we'll blast a hole in the hull and vent them into space," Kelly commanded. Communications fired away the message and within a dozen or so seconds, there was an answer.

"They agree," communications reported, though even under a helmet, there was body-language that she could read as if it was an open book and it said that everyone here was silently conflicted. Gamma Company had a long history of things going wrong when there were enemy personnel being secured and nobody desired a failure in what was currently a long run of successful operations. Never the less, they went on with their jobs.

"Spartan-164," Kelly said to her appointed XO, "you have command of the bridge. Radio through any updates on the situation immediately. I'll be joining the boarding operation."

"Ma'am," the XO saluted, though again, Kelly could read an unsaid response that it wasn't wise for their commander to join the fight personally. Still, it was the only way to make sure that this operation didn't become worse than it already was.

Ten minutes later, Kelly was suited up again in MINJONIR Armor, the Spartan-II still standing over the two dozen Spartan-III's ready to follow. Armed with MA5B Assault Rifles and Thruster-Packs, they'd make the leap from the Sacrifice into the Normandy's hanger. If this was a ruse, then it was unwise to secure the two ships together. If the enemy tried anything, the Spartans themselves would be able to either board by force, or be plucked out of space later when the battle was over.

"Boarding team, prep for assault. Remember, non-lethal measures," Kelly commanded as the doors rolled open and the vacuum of space eased in. The Normandy's hanger-door was open, but a shield had been projected over it to keep the vacuum out, similar to a Covenant ship. "Go!"

The Spartans jumped from the Sacrifice's starboard hanger and activated their thruster-packs, jetting across open space towards that open hanger door. The dozen-strong advance team went through the shield and were pulled down by artificial gravity, landing on the deck. They immediately moved forward, securing the entrance for the second team to land. As soon as she passed through the barrier, Kelly

felt gravity again and deactivated the thruster-pack.

The Spartans had quickly secured the hanger, keeping their rifles pointed at the three hostiles who were down on their knees, unarmed.

"Hanger secure, ma'am," Isaiah reported. "Permission to sweep the ship. Three isn't a full crew."

"When we attacked them earlier, they didn't have time to board one," Kelly answered, remembering their previous attack on the shipyard. They'd managed to wipe out the crew and their security teams, so it was possible that three were the only ones still aboard. Still, it needed to be swept, yet it was likely a very expected move of them to move deeper into the ship. "Hold ground here for now."

"Prisoners secure," a Spartan reported, pointing his assault rifle on the aliens. "Orders?"

"Stand ground," Kelly said, looking around the ship. It wasn't the first time they'd boarded an Alliance vessel, but it was the first time they'd come aboard a military ship. If this was one of their own, she'd been worried about an AI response, but that was one of the things the Alliance lacked. She pulled out her sidearm and pointed it at the alien designated as a Turian. "Can you understand us?"

"Yes," the Turian answered plainly.

"Are you the commander here?"

"Yes," the Turian said again. Before she could continue, the COM channel activated.

"Ma'am," Sacrifice's XO radioed through. "Three ONI Corvettes have come out of Slipspace. Like the Prowler earlier, they're refusing to recognize us as friendlies and have launched Longsword Fighters and Pelicans, ETA eight minutes."

"Spool up the drive and prepare to jump," Kelly answered back, turning off her helmet speakers so the aliens couldn't hear the conversation. "Have all crew at arms and ready to defend."

"They already are, ma'am. We're having issues securing this Frigate however. It'll take time, more than we have. We could always cut it loose now and let those corvettes handle it."

"Allowing this ship to fall into Section Three hands is not the mission. I want the frigate secure and ready to piggy-back with us when we make the jump, and I want it done before ONI arrives."

"Roger that, commander. I'll update you if anything happens. Sacrifice-actual out."

"Alright everyone," Kelly shouted to the crew in the hanger. "Incoming hostile forces. Scimitar, Chakram, you'll follow me back to Sacrifice. The rest of you, hold ground and prepare to defend this area against incoming hostiles. Saber One, you are in charge."

"Ma'am, what about the prisoners?" Ash asked. Kelly mulled over the worth of this self appointed secondary objective and decided upon it. They were too much the risk in a combat scenario.

"Scimitar will drag this Turian back with us," Kelly told him, before turning to the two squads they were leaving behind. "As for the rest, if hostiles do board in strength, shoot them. Basic resource denial. Now move out."

Isaiah grabbed the Turian by the arm and hefted him up onto his feet. The Spartan III and alien roughly stood the same height rather than the smaller Salarian and Quarian. The Spartan shoved the Turian forward towards the hanger doors. When the Turian nodded to his comrades as he was led away, Isaiah struck him with the end of his rifle.

"ETA six minutes on incoming ONI forces, commander."

\* \* \*

><p>Tali and Bau knelt down on the floor, hands across the back of their heads as the enemy stood guard around them. While Bau hadn't had a helmet with him during their flight from the Citadel, Tali could easily continue to talk with EDI within the confines of her helmet. Thanks to the AI, she overheard everything the Spartans said over their COM channel, including the execution orders.<p>

"Do not be concerned," EDI stated. "I have the situation under complete control."

"We're being attacked" Tali whispered as the ship shook underneath them. "Things are not under control."

"I'm deliberately causing fluctuation in the engines to delay their efforts at towing the ship," EDI said. "With luck, that should buy me the time I need to gain access to their systems and lift the lockdown they've placed on the jump drive. If that doesn't work, we'll proceed with our second option."

"Okay," Tali answered, trying to look around without being noticed. She'd counted thirteen that had left with Garrus when the word of an attack came through but there was still twelve in the hanger bay, setting up defensive positions. The COM that EDI had tapped into piped up again.

"Where should we drag those two?" one male voice asked.

"Keep them there for now," another voice answered back.

"Ash, if even a few ODST's come charging in here, they'll go down in the first few seconds outside of cover."

"Can it, Mark. If it wasn't for the Commander's rather clear orders, I'd shoot them now. Hell, I would have had this ship cleared by now. Keep watch, because we'll likely have enemies at our backs as well as coming in through the front door."

"If we're going to use them as meat shields, we might as well position them more effectively, somewhere center but not in the open" a female voice added in.

"Oliva has got a point. Mark, move them to in front of the elevator doors, behind that crate there."

One of the many green-armored Spartans came over and shoved them to their feet. "Move it."

"Heads up all squads aboard Normandy, two ONI Prowlers have entered the system," a voice over the COM announced as they knelt again in front of the elevator doors, behind a crate too short to be good cover. "We've now got Pelicans coming in with an ETA of two minutes. Intel suggests shock troopers. Acknowledge."

"Acknowledged, Sacrifice," Ash answered. "We've completed setting up defensive positions. Any chance of reinforcements however?"

"Negative, Saber-One. Stand by for further orders."

"More ONI ships are appearing on sensors," EDI spoke up again. "They total five now and are closing rapidly. The Hierarchy fleet has noticed the battle here and are inbound, but with an ETA of thirty minutes. That gives us a maximum time-limit, as they have orders to destroy the Normandy."

"Any good news?" Tali questioned, not desiring to know how things we're only getting worse. Joker was thankfully still up in the cockpit, though it wasn't like they could go anywhere.

"I've stopped the engine disturbances to allow them to connect the ships. As soon as I have the jump-drive online, we'll leap to a nearby system and take our boarders with us. From there, I'll move onto taking control of their ship's computers," EDI explained. "Warning, incoming Pelican drop-ships. I'd advise you keep your head down. Standby for my signal. On my mark, get into the elevator."

The Normandy rumbled once more and every Spartan raised their weapons on the closed hanger-bay doors. Half a minute later, sparks flew as ONI forces began boarding the ship.

"They're incoming," Ash shouted. "Mark, shoot em."

"Now," EDI broadcast over the loudspeaker and the elevator doors slid open. The gravity suddenly increased and everyone was sent tumbling to the floor. Tali grabbed Bau and they rolled into the elevator, the doors shutting behind them as they were sent upwards to the CIC. EDI relaxed the gravity and stopped crushing them into the floor. "As I said, things are under control."

"Hardly," Bau muttered, "what's the plan on rescuing Vakarian?"

"I plan to barter once I have the ability to flush them out their own airlocks," EDI answered casually, the elevator doors opening to the CIC. Tali immediately snatched up the weapons waiting for them there and so did Bau. Armed again, they quickly sprinted to the cockpit where Joker was rebooting the ship's systems with EDI.

"Alright, I've actually managed to override the safeties and get all the thrusters going again and the jump-drive should be a few seconds apparently," Joker rapidly explained. "They've got us attached

though. Either of us jump and we'll be dragging the other with us. Can I again how stupid Garrus' plan was? He got himself captured. Also EDI, how do we actually plan on getting the jump-drive going again? They've seized manual control."

"Then everything is going to plan," Bau answered, looking at the sensor station. "Those ONI ships are engaging us now. We've got hostiles in our hanger and they're crawling over Sacrifice."

"EDI, hail the Sacrifice," Tali ordered.

"Hailing," EDI answered.

"What the hell are we doing?" Joker questioned.

"Negotiating," Tali answered as EDI successfully opened up a communication channel.

\* \* \*

><p>They all herded into Sacrifice's CIC, with the Spartan commander immediately taking charge. Garrus was pulled along with them, held at gunpoint at the door as the crew continued to control the ship as they were swarmed with enemy ships.<p>

"Report!"

"Point defence took out half of them but Pelicans have landed across our hull and the Normandy's underside, all in our blind spots. They're pouring out shock troopers. Corvettes and Prowlers are holding at range," the ship's XO reported.

"Have we secured the Normandy?"

"Positive, sir. The Normandy is properly secure."

"Secure the ships, prepare to jump," she commanded.

"We can't," a crewman manning navigation answered. "Something has entered our system and powered down our Slipspace Drive. It'll take ten minutes to reboot. We can't jump."

"Our FTL can," Garrus finally spoke up, still with a Spartan pointing an Assault Rifle to back of his head. The ship commander swung around to face him, genuinely surprised he'd spoken. Before anyone could react, communications spoke up.

"Ma'am, we've got a communications attempt from the Normandy."

"Put it through to speakers," the commander answered without a delay, staring straight at Garrus.

"\_This is the Normandy. Release your control over our ship's systems and we can jump both ships. Do it now, or kiss goodbye to your oxygen."\_

Garrus chuckled slightly at that ultimatum, earning him another strike over the back with an Assault Rifle. After shaking off the shock, he grew concerned that he could hear gunfire nearby. No doubt the boarding parties were finding their way inside the ship.



"Do we still have an access to their jump-drive computers?" the commander questioned. From the sound of her voice, she wasn't the kind of person who reacted well to threats. She immediately closed the channel to the Normandy.

"Yes ma'am."

"Good. Take control and jump us. Also, attempt to access the primary computer and vent all oxygen or whatever they breath from the Normandy."

"We... can't. I can't tell if its the Normandy or those Prowlers blocking us from accessing their systems."

\_"I am blocking your access," \_EDI spoke up through the COMs.  
\_"Continuation of hostilities will only see both our ships captured or destroyed. I will unlock your connection and you will also allow me access back to my jump-drive."\_

There was a prolonged silence. Garrus couldn't read whatever occurred behind the Spartan's polarized helmets, but they all stood still and silent as their commander came to a decision.

"How long?" the commander simply questioned.

\_"I can jump us within ninety seconds," \_EDI answered.

"Do it. Lieutenant, disable all our overrides on the Normandy and return them to their previous states," the commander ordered. "Also, get Saber on the line immediately."

\_"I have control. Stand by for jump in ninety seconds," \_EDI stated. Garrus looked at the view-screens, seeing those drop-ships now detaching from the hull and speeding away.

"Ma'am, ONI troopers are falling back. They've detected the jump-drive and are returning to their ships."

\_"Garrus!" \_he heard Tali's voice shout through EDI's forced channel. Worse yet, he could hear gunfire sounding through the Normandy's CIC.  
\_"They aren't falling back. They're still attacking. Joker, get down! Bau-"\_

There was a wash of static and channel went offline. Garrus tensed, unable to react.

"Tali! Are you there? Joker? EDI?" Garrus shouted out, despite everyone around him. The Spartan behind him smacked him over the head this time, sending him to the floor.

"Shut it!" the Spartan yelled. Garrus attempted to stumble back to his feet but the blow scrambled him. It was a good many seconds later when he came back to full senses and heard EDI.

\_"Jump commencing..." \_

The Sacrifice shuddered as it was dragged along by the Normandy, accelerating away from the battle and into another system. The blinding flash subsided, revealing empty space beyond the Sacrifice

once occupied by ONI Corvettes. They had escaped for now. The guard leaned down and pulled Garrus off the ground, pointing a pistol straight at the back of his head.

"Normandy, do you read? Normandy are you there?" the commander spoke and nothing answered but silence. "Communications, any signal from our teams?"

Communications took a moment to respond, staring at his console. "No ma'am. I'm reading no active transponders aboard the Normandy. They're gone."

\* \* \*

><p>The cleanup was remarkably fast as staff swept the tiled floors of dust, rubble and glass. A task-force of the member states stood guard everywhere, primarily made up of Hierarchy troops. It hadn't exactly been peaceful for the last few years but once again the galaxy had been rattled, but not nearly enough. One could personally think that the Reapers had destroyed any sense of security for a few generations to come. Decades ago, a brazen attack on the Citadel would have been a endless outrage but now, people merely shrugged and went on with their lives.<p>

Shepard made brisk pace down the corridors, checking over notes on his data-pad as he received the facts and figures. Three trillion credits worth of damage and that was the least of their problems. It would cost much more to replace the staff lost over the past few days. Still, it could be done. Harder things were to come. An officer; wearing the distinctive black and silver of the Goliath Task-Force uniform and carrying a much larger data-slate under arm, jogged up beside him.

"Commander Shepard."

"Lieutenant-" Shepard said, spotting his rank emblem.

"Lieutenant Gauss, sir," the officer told him, snapping off a quick salute. It was likely the most professional greeting he'd gotten all day and for that, he took a liking. Most babbled on about how it was a honor.

"Have you got a report back from Goliath-actual?" Shepard asked.

"Yes, sir. They give short congratulations on the successful operation and recommend continuation of the plan," Gauss reported. "Apparently, the Normandy has fallen off their radar, but they're sure that they'll be able to pass on its location within twelve hours. Meanwhile, we've had the C-Sec Office issue those warrants across all Citadel space just in case."

"Best news all day," Shepard said, turning off his data-pad and handing it to the Lieutenant. They came to a meeting room, passing by a squad of elite Citadel Guard standing to attention. Beyond the glass walls and horde of administrators rushing around, Shepard could see that everything was already in full swing. Representatives had been rushed from all corners of Citadel Space to quickly assume their predecessors positions.

"This emergency gathering is now in session," Ambassador Robert D'mana announced; the System's Alliance representative beginning. "As agreed, all four appointed here today are immediately ratified as members of the Council until further notice or cessation of emergency measures. Without further bureaucracy, let us get to the matter at hand."

They all began the usual chatter and Shepard filtered it all out. "Your opinion, Lieutenant, what's it like out there at the moment? Speak freely."

"From the sound of it sir, not so much ruckus. Cerberus is a well tread topic, completely ignored. Some are interested who will take the vacant Council spots once the emergency appointments are dismissed, but so far, you are the most highly discussed element. All skeptical at first, but recently, it seems to have swung in your favor."

"That sounds good," Shepard said. "Carry on, Lieutenant."

The Commander walked straight in past the guards and casually down at the table as the emergency Council continued to ramble. After a few seconds, they noticed him and went silent.

"Ah, Commander," D'mana said, turning his attention to Shepard. "While your still here, we might as well get a few things out of the way. Firstly of all things, your illegal private army-"

"I'd hardly call them that, Councillor," Shepard answered. "Goliath is a small force, headquartered in the Terminus Systems. By right, I don't see any legal problems having them here."

"There are limits to the power a Spectre can wield, Shepard," the new Turian Councillor; K'rique, spoke. "After all, you made that apparent in the wake of Saren's assault, whose increasing power the Council had chosen to ignore prior to the Eden Prime attack."

"I'm a Spectre now?" Shepard said, leaning forward. "As last as I recall, my status as a Spectre was revoked, along with my rank with the Alliance. I've moved on and continued protecting us anyway. If I really wanted to use my forces to stage a coup and overthrow the Council, then I would have done it by now. That's not why I'm here however. We have a clear and present enemy and that is Cerberus."

"I'm curious to why Cerberus has chosen now of all times to attack," the Salarian Councillor questioned. "As I recall, they've been virtually crippled as an organization for the past decade."

"Cerberus has reorganized under the Leviathans," Shepard told them. "Another present threat the previous Council decided to ignore. Don't make the same mistake. They have the same capacity as the Reapers to unleash destruction. They operate elusively through pawns however and by eliminating Cerberus, we deprive them of their means of attack."

"How do you suggest this is done, Shepard?" D'mana questioned. "The Spectres have carried out endless operations against Cerberus prior to this attack, and obviously they failed to destroy it. How could

anything you possess possibly change the fact that Cerberus has hidden itself?"

"Give me back my Spectre status and allow my task-force to operate within the bounds of Citadel Space," Shepard told them. "I'll give you results. As far as I've heard, three quarters of our Spectres have been wiped out by the surprise attack. The surviving quarter isn't enough to help you put an end to Cerberus."

"So you want what? For us to legitimize your personal goon-squad?" the Salarian Councillor questioned. "Give you authority? To do so is not in the power of this Council, but in the hands of our members governments."

"As I said, give me Spectre status," Shepard said again. "Make the Goliath task-force as a special forces unit of the Citadel Council and they'll serve directly under my command. I'll operate as any Spectre would, just one with significant resources to exercise in the Traverse and Terminus Systems."

"This decision will take time," the Asari Councillor took a diplomatic approach, and Shepard scowled, knowing she was stalling for time. "It requires some serious deliberation."

"Councillors, with all respects, we ran out of time a day ago when this station was almost overrun for the third time. Action needs to be now."

"I'm with the Commander," D'mana stated. "I loathe the idea we're going to sit here and do exactly what brought us to this point and that is prattle endlessly about what to do. We need action and I believe that Commander Shepard here can do that job."

"I'd be hard pressed to find a time you've let us down," the Turian Councillor K'rique stated. "I'm also in favor of reappointing Shepard as a Spectre."

The Asari and Salarian exchanged looks, and decided that they'd give ground for now. Without further ado, the Asari Councillor spoke. "Very well then. As a temporary measure of this state of emergency, we grant Commander Shepard the status of Spectre. From now on, you'll report directly to this Council as you move to counter the Cerberus threat."

Shepard smiled and nodded.

"Thank you, Councillors."

\* \* \*

><p>Kelly hit the control pad and the door to this sealed compartment rolled open. In the makeshift brig, the Turian stood up. The Spartan simply walked in and shut the door behind her.<p>

"I'll make one thing clear," she warned the alien, "I do not deal with the enemy."

"At first I was hoping to get aboard, so that when our AI EDI took control of your systems, I could bargain with you," the Turian answered. "But as it turns out, we have common enemies. You're

getting chased by your own side. Care to explain what that's about?"

"That's classified," Kelly answered, staring at the alien. Maybe it was the translation or perhaps it was their culture, but his casual manner was without a hint of professionalism. This alien certainly was not a soldier if he lacked even the most basic discipline. The records however told another story entirely.

"By who?" he questioned.

"I'll be the one talking," Kelly told him, "now shut it. We've seized control of your ship and have taken your comrades into custody. One Human pilot; badly wounded, and the Salarian, whose currently giving him medical treatment. You're Quarian is gone and so are my men."

"Are they dead?" Garrus questioned, dreading to know the answer. If Tali was dead, then... he could scarcely accept it, let alone think about the implications.

"Gone," Kelly repeated. "No bodies, no signs. The Salarian reports they took prisoners, though I doubt my Spartans are alive. The Quarian however probably is."

For that, he was relieved. Alive in whatever circumstances was better than dead. "So now what? Are you going to take us back to your base? If you don't work for the UNSC, then who do you work for?"

"The right side," Kelly answered. "The Office of Naval Intelligence is only a single branch of the UNSC, and even within them, there are more branches. And no, you'll be staying with us for an indefinite duration until deemed otherwise."

"If you think you can keep me in this cell, then you're mistaken," Garrus answered. "EDI's likely already in everyone of your ship's computers."

"That I know," Kelly said. "AI's are scarce resources, more so among your kind than ours. I wanted a sentient system in Sacrifice from day one to keep us updated with command and now we have one."

Garrus stayed silent at that, completely puzzled by what the Spartan meant. EDI was in their computer systems and now they had an AI.

"What do you-"

"Command has sent us new orders. Someone in Section Zero is very impressed with the Normandy's track record and has decided that we're to cooperate with you," she stated, revealing the farce this interrogation had been from the beginning. It was just making absolutely clear who was in charge. "Your AI has agreed to this deal. We have a common objective in removing the Quarian from Section Three control for our varying reasons. So the Normandy will be accompanying the Sacrifice to a resupply at Omega. From there, we'll be targeting ONI outposts. That is of course, if you agree to obey my command for the entirety of this mission."

"It's not like I have a choice, so yea, you lead then," Garrus

answered.

"Good, then we have an understanding on that matter at least."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Author's Afterward:<strong>

**\*\*Apologies for the great lack of updates over the past two months. What happens when you continuously repeat a scene in your mind for preparation to write it, you get board of it and it becomes a total drag to write. This was one such chapter, but thankfully now I can move into Section II and yea: a Normandy-Sacrifice team up is in the name of the plot from henceforward, just one of the many arcs that'll occur over the course of Section II.\*\***

**\*\*Also, as a statement to address a continuing issue of mine. I personally when browsing this site despise crossovers involving more than two properties. You see what might be a good crossover and find out there's another universe involved which you have no clue about, therefore stop reading. Thus, Kin From The Stars: Incursion will always remain purely Halo - Mass Effect. That's not to say I've always had very appealing ideas of bringing in elements from other universes that would fit extremely neatly within the combined timeline and make things even more interesting. \*\***

**\*\*So I'm planning a short story spin-off, Kin From The Stars: Downfall. Whether you consider it 'canon' to the series as a whole is your personal decision, its reading is not required to continue enjoying Incursion. However, if you enjoy the third property I'll be doing a crossover with or are simply curious, I encourage you to give it a read. It'll feature a mission aboard the Normandy \*\*\*\*prior to Operation \*\*Thermopylae, and I'm hoping to post it alongside the next chapter of Incursion, so keep an eye out. As for what I'm doing a crossover with, that'll be a secret till release. \*\*\*\***

End  
file.